

# God of the Marginals

The Biblical Ideology  
Demonstrated by Jesus

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## Dedication

My first volume *Painfully Clear: The Parables of Jesus* was dedicated to a previous generation: to those who had helped me find my path. The second *Light Denied: A Challenge to Historians* was dedicated to my own generation: to those who have accompanied me on my journey. This third volume is dedicated to the next generation, to my three daughters who in their own way will carry the torch:

Vérène  
Rachel  
Lydia

## Thanks

My thanks to Professor John Rogerson for identifying howlers and making helpful suggestions and my especial thanks (ordinary thanks not being enough) to John Rowe for criticising, checking and correcting almost everything I have ever written.

Parker's subject is the Hebrew ideology witnessed to in the biblical texts. He claims this ideology is the rationalisation of the perspective of the dustbinned marginals, the only inhabitants of the ancient Near East in a position to understand that nothing justifies the exclusion of anyone from sharing the common benefits of civilisation. Parker argues that somewhere around the turn of the first millennium BCE a revolution took place driven by a group of people pejoratively labelled 'apiru/Hebrews by civilisation administrators. It was this particular group who created the biblical ideology, an ideology personalised in the revolutionary nature of Yahweh, god of the Marginals. As Parker sees it the characteristic that most distinguishes the Hebrew ideology from the revolutionary ideologies we are familiar with today, namely liberalism and socialism, was its aim. This was to change people not by coercion but rather by demonstrating a better way of living together: loving the neighbour as the self. The Hebrews believed that as a result of such a demonstration their god Yahweh would shame the surrounding civilisations (the Gentiles) thus persuading them to abandon their exploitative and marginalizing ways.

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# Introduction

The purpose of my three volumes, of which this present one is the last, has been to find out what it is that gives the Bible its characteristic cutting edge. In the past it appeared obvious to many Christians that this was simply the fact that it contained the revealed word of God. Nowadays if you say such a thing you risk being excluded from academic debate about the Bible, the principle being that religion is one thing and scientific discourse another. So, taking this point on board let me phrase the matter thus. What is it about the Bible that makes it so fascinating? What lies hidden in its depths that sets it in one light head and shoulders above all other works of literature both ancient and modern? Writing in these terms I am well aware that some will immediately interject that they don't find the Bible fascinating and that far from standing head and shoulders above other literary works it appears to them to be a load of religious nonsense. I have to declare that my instinctive reaction to such rejoinders is to be dismissive. What can you say to people who have perfectly good sight yet fail to see?

However, when I pull myself together I have to admit such critics have a point, since it is true that everything depends on how you understand this seemingly enigmatic work. The Bible is certainly usually described by admirers, though not, I hasten to add, by myself, as 'a great religious work'. Seen in this light I am forced to agree that it is perfectly right for those who are not religious to dismiss it, since there exists no criterion by which a religious work can be judged by humanity as a whole. For it stands to reason that each religious tradition will tend to judge its own religious works to be the greatest and that non-religious people, for their part, will tend to write them all off. So, in the absence of some universally accepted means of judging religious works, who can say who is right and wrong when dealing with religious matters or what religious work stands above another?

Granted I see this point, how can I maintain that the Bible stands head and shoulders above all other literary works, as I do? *The answer can only be that I do not regard it as a religious book.* Of course, it is true that the Bible exhibits religious features and it is certainly the case that it is written in what we tend to regard as religious language i.e. myth. However, my experience in struggling for the best part of my life to understand what it is about has convinced me that these are secondary features which I, as a naturally non-religious person, was obliged to negotiate in order to understand the truly remarkable *ideological sense* it in fact makes. It is this experience which leads me now to say without hesitation that the Bible constitutes the greatest ideological work so far produced by humanity. If I am prepared to stick my neck out in saying this – for those who do not share my ideological convictions will certainly lose no opportunity to pour scorn on what I say – *it is because I am convinced that appropriate, universally acknowledged criteria do in fact exist for judging between rival ideologies and that such criteria vindicate my judgement concerning the Bible. Indeed one of the objectives I have in writing this book is to demonstrate this crucial point.*

Of course the trouble with an analysis which pits ideology against religion is that everything hinges on what precisely is meant by these two difficult words. I have made it clear that what I mean by religion is the way in which people make sense of existence by weaving about it some mystery or imaginative hunch usually labelled God.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew writers of the Bible for their part clearly endowed the universe with meaning. They did this in their own way, of course, by suggesting that it had been created by a very particular god, it being generally understood by the people of the ancient world that a god naturally expresses his fundamental ideological character in his acts. In our terms a right wing god would naturally create a world with a right wing grain and a left wing god, equally naturally, would create a world with a left wing grain. As I see it, any speculative hunch about how the universe came to be endowed with meaning, if indeed it did,<sup>2</sup> constitutes religion, at least as I have defined this word. However, there is an important distinction between this sort of imaginative behaviour and what I call ideology, which has to do with our different perceptions of the world *as we actually experience it from our different standpoints, there where our feet are placed in the social context.*

Putting the question of human individuality to one side, everyone is aware of the fact that though aristocrats, members of the bourgeoisie, and proletarians all view the same world they tend to see it rather differently as a result of their different social positions. In looking at the world from a particular perspective social groups tend to create worldviews which justify their own interests. To put it baldly, dominant social classes tend to have conservative or *status quo* worldviews whereas in the case of dominated social classes where they have independent worldviews these tend to be subversive or *revolutionary*. So far so good. However, the problem with the worldview concept is that it is terribly vague. In order to analyse and discuss worldviews, as we must, we need to understand that they are made up of a whole range of individual ideas that are politically coloured by the interests and perspectives of the social group creating them. Thus we habitually say that one person has socialist ideas, which we sometimes describe as red, while another person has conservative ideas which we qualify as blue. This is what I am talking about when I use the word ideology. I define an ideology therefore as a worldview in which the salient ideas are given a particular political colour, due to the special interests of those who first created it.

The trouble with the word ideology is that people tend to see it as something ugly since it is often employed as a term of abuse. For example, Margaret Thatcher used it to decry what she saw as the self-serving ideas propounded by socialists, which is rather funny when one remembers that Marx himself used it to denote the self-serving ideas which the ruling class imposed on everyone else! For its part the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines ideology as 'the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual'. I find this common usage infinitely preferable since it enables us to use the word analytically and neutrally rather than as a term of abuse *and we have desperate need of such an analytical tool if we are to do our job in identifying the Bible's political colour.* The simple fact is that as individuals and as members of social

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<sup>1</sup> Some will find this definition of religion too narrow because, perhaps without really being aware of it, they include political and ethical features in their understanding of religion. This, of course, is not permissible when you are making a distinction between religion and ideology as I am doing here.

<sup>2</sup> As I see it viewing the universe as meaningless is itself based on nothing but a hunch.



groups we all have worldviews coloured by special interests and there is nothing about this situation *per se* that we should be ashamed of since we can only start off by viewing the world from where we find ourselves standing. However, becoming conscious of the fact that others do not necessarily view the world as we do should lead us to see that individual viewpoints not only enable perception *but also distort it*, leading to the question as to which viewpoint is best i.e.: distorts the least. Some Marxists (though not Marx himself) have claimed the answer to this question is that the best viewpoint belongs to the proletariat. For only they, as the lowest social class with revolutionary potential, are capable of doing away with exploitation by introducing the panacea of the classless society. The Bible offers a different answer to this crucial question and my objective in this book is to find out exactly what it is, *nothing mysterious (religious) having a place in the analysis.*

If I insist that religion has no place in this crucial ideological debate it is not because I am against religion as such. For, as I have said, ideological debate, insofar as it gives credence to the existence of good and bad and right and wrong, can only exist because of what I term religion. For only by means of some sort of speculative hunch, whether this involves God or not, can the universe be seen as having a grain and without such a concept no ethical/political discussion is even possible.<sup>3</sup> We can, of course, all become atheists but logically this can only be done by all agreeing that morals are entirely arbitrary; there being no such thing as right and wrong apart from that which we as individuals, or as members of a group, either like or dislike. This, in effect, means returning to an animal state, something none of us in our right minds is prepared to do. We find ourselves, therefore, on the horns of a dilemma. On the one side we can only speak about right and wrong by introducing an unjustifiable speculative hunch that existence is somehow meaningful. On the other side we can only do away with such an unjustifiable speculative hunch by losing the advantage which consciousness has brought us. I would have a sneaking admiration for an atheist who behaved as an animal, believing that morals were entirely arbitrary. However, all the atheists I have ever met have been just as morally hidebound as the rest of us, especially when someone steals their car. So I find myself stuck somewhere uncomfortable between religion and atheism. For I am just as unwilling to make anything out of the necessary speculations I find myself forced to make<sup>4</sup> – as religious people almost invariably do – as I am unwilling to take the consequences of refusing to make them – as atheists usually pretend to do but in fact don't.

#### *About this Volume*

By and large twentieth century readings of the Bible can be classified as conservative, liberal, socialist or fundamentalist, depending on the ideological (or religious) motivation attributed to the biblical authors. However, my own reading of it falls outside of this classification for I see the Bible as presenting in the main a *marginal* ideology, which is to say a worldview diametrically at odds with the three *civilizational*

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<sup>3</sup> I take it as read that philosophy has failed and will go on failing to establish what is good and evil from reason alone.

<sup>4</sup> in order to talk meaningfully about politics and ethics

worldviews mentioned above<sup>5</sup>. For this reason I position myself alongside fundamentalists in rejecting conservative, liberal and socialist accounts of the Bible. However, unlike fundamentalists I take a critical stance, believing that the Bible does not need protection, having everything to gain from the closest scrutiny. My own critical approach convinces me that the biblical Yahweh is not a *status-quo*, authoritarian god blindly to be obeyed, as conservative readings suggest. Neither is he a god of freedom and striving towards perfection as liberal readings would have us believe. Nor indeed is he the egalitarian god encapsulating the hope of those who belong to the bottom layers of society, as socialists pretend. Rather he is the god of the dust-binned outcasts, the god of radical solidarity who insists that human consciousness itself dictates that no one should ever be rubbished in such a manner. As I read it the Bible presents us with a revolutionary tradition, though it is important to understand that the revolution described is not a class-based phenomenon since it is generated by outsiders and not by a sectional interest within society.<sup>6</sup> As such it involves a strategy of saving the world by a process of shaming (demonstration and exposure) rather than of organizing forces to either take power (or maintain it) over the creative human processes through coercion. The Bible's fundamental pattern is a covenant in which two parties agree to work in collaboration. On one side there are the marginals who must stand up and demonstrate what it means to live as a community which practices radical solidarity. On the other side there is Yahweh himself who must vindicate this exercise by seeing to it that the world is effectively shamed by such a demonstration, making all things at present seemingly impossible perfectly possible.

### *My approach*

Since conservative, liberal and socialist scholars have invariably produced conservative, liberal and socialist readings of the bible it seemed to me imperative that in producing a marginal reading I should show that I was not, like them, 'looking down a deep well and seeing my own reflection in the water at the bottom'. So, bearing in mind the need for an ideology-free and openly verifiable reading of the text, I chose to enter the Bible via Jesus' parables. My idea was that since parable-telling was clearly one of the main characteristics (if not the main characteristic) of Jesus' approach, if I could objectively determine how parables worked I should then be able to demonstrate what he had been up to in using them and hence to identify his fundamental strategy. By means of a sustained analysis<sup>7</sup> which anyone can now check for themselves I was able, in my first volume *Painfully Clear: The Parables of Jesus*,<sup>8</sup> to show that parable is a reactive speech-form and that, in extensively using parables and other illustrative speech-forms like complex similes, metaphors and similes, Jesus was acting not to propound truths but rather to expose the attitudes and behaviour of those around him.

I further defended this position against alternative proposals in my second volume *Light Denied: A Challenge to Historians* and then went on to investigate whether this reactive strategy was reflected elsewhere in the Gospels. First I discovered that in what scholars

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<sup>5</sup> On the whole I do not view fundamentalism as a civilisational worldview whereas the other three ideologies most certainly are.

<sup>6</sup> Marginals are within society but not of society.

<sup>7</sup> The only sustained analysis of the parable speech-form that I have ever seen.

<sup>8</sup> Sheffield Academic Press 1996.

have come to call the ‘pronouncement stories’ the evangelists had indeed shown Jesus as acting *reactively* rather than *proactively*. It seemed to me that, properly understood, these recitals should be called ‘exposure stories’ not ‘pronouncement stories’, since in them Jesus teaches no lessons but rather behaves in such a way as to expose the attitudes and behaviour of his interlocutors. Second, I further discovered that the evangelists had clearly used Isaiah’s ‘light’ theme to show Jesus as acting reactively rather than proactively: throwing light on situations rather than announcing heavenly truths.

Having established that the evidence in the Gospels suggests Jesus worked with a reactive strategy of demonstration and exposure I now seek in this third volume to show that Jesus was not a man *introducing a new religion* but rather an Israelite calling on his countrymen to join him in *fulfilling the law and the prophets* so that Yahweh, for his part, could start bringing in his kingdom. Given this objective it has proved necessary to examine the Old Testament critically to see what it was that Jesus had found in the Jewish tradition to cause him to reject the normal, proactive approach which all of us instinctively adopt when seeking to affect our situations. With Jesus’ peculiar reactive strategy in mind I uncover in the Genesis and Exodus texts first the idea of Yahweh as god of the marginals, second the Hebrew ‘revolutionary’ tradition of radical solidarity and third the strategy of world transformation through shaming. I then trace the historical development of this ‘revolution’, including the phenomenon of revisionism in the other biblical texts, so as to produce my ‘revolution’/revisionism model as a way of comprehending the unity which we call the Hebrew Bible. With the aid of this model I then finally return to the Gospels in order to establish a full portrait of the historical Jesus as the one who fulfilled Israel’s contract, enabling Yahweh to vindicate it by bringing in his kingdom. This whole approach may seem circuitous, as indeed it is; however, it has to be understood that it was dictated by my primary concern to access the biblical texts by way of an ideology-free point of entry and to do so in a manner which everyone could check for themselves, hence the considerable (some would say inordinate) space given in my two previous volumes to parable analysis.

#### *My methodology*

Given that my subject matter includes the whole Bible I obviously find myself embarrassingly dependant on the work of hundreds of scholars who quite naturally possess either conservative, liberal or socialist perspectives. They may not believe that these perspectives detrimentally effect their work but I am only too aware how much they do. I have therefore developed a methodology of my own whereby I accept such scholars’ findings where it seems to me these are proved by their own standards, while at the same time being radically suspicious of the conclusions they draw from these findings since it is here that ideological falsification mostly occurs.

#### *My thesis*

Just as Darwin’s thesis concerned the origin of the species mine concerns the Bible’s origin, since clearly the Bible’s own peculiar ideology (in its own terms its ‘god’) constituted its birthing factor. Darwin, of course, was all too aware that the way in

which he understood the origin of the species would, if proved right, inevitably change the whole way in which the science of biology was conducted. Though I make no claim to be a Darwin I too am aware that the way in which I understand the Bible as the fruit of a marginal revolution will, if proved correct, reverse the whole way in which it is *presently* understood. I say presently, of course, because unlike the species the Bible is a human construct, which means that those who were actively involved in its origins must presumably have been aware what these were. In other words whereas Darwin was writing about an origin he believed *he was discovering for the first time* I can only claim to be writing about origins *which I believe I have rediscovered*. In a curious way this difference makes my task more complicated for I have not only to prove to other peoples' satisfaction that my thesis is correct but I also have to explain to their satisfaction how it was that the knowledge about the origins of the Bible became lost and how it was that a miserable nobody like myself came to make the rediscovery when thousands of far more gifted, good and intelligent people failed to do so! Though I acknowledge this is a tall order I do believe I have a satisfactory explanation which I present here as my sub thesis.

#### *My sub thesis*

As the encapsulation of a marginal viewpoint the biblical texts have always been anathema to civilization folk and especially to scholars whose task it is to preserve, review and understand all important civilization matters. Consequently as civilization's clerks<sup>9</sup> scholars in both their modern and ancient forms have always constituted the group least suited to preserving, reviewing and understanding the biblical material since their natural bent has always been to make it bearable to the civilizations they represent. It is perfectly understandable therefore that the Bible's marginal origins eventually became 'lost' since that has always been the unavowed objective of the scholarly enterprise as a whole – to lose while pretending to preserve.

#### *My quest*

When I started out to try and identify the ideology which I, and so presumably others, experience lying at the heart of the Bible – an ideology which surprises by every now and then setting the reader alight – I knew of course that it would not turn out to be one of the ideologies supposedly identified by the experts. Such conservative, liberal and sometimes even socialist ideologies I already knew from my studies to be alien importations. Coming from a protestant middleclass background there had been a time in my life when a socialist approach had made more sense of the Bible for me than either the liberal ideology I had been brought up with or the conservative catholic ideology which, rightly or wrongly, I had always taken as being a pattern of thought long since redundant. Socialist ideology made me aware, for example, that my relatively privileged position within society was intimately connected with the enormous lack of privilege only too evident in many people round about me. As such it sometimes seemed to chime in with the Bible's unmistakable call for solidarity with the poor and its prediction of a coming day when this situation of privilege will be reversed. However, it was clear to me even then, that though it undeniably

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<sup>9</sup> Intellectual officials.

demonstrated a commitment to the poor – in the form of the working class – socialist ideology involved a salvation that was brought about by coercion, exactly as was the case with both conservative and liberal ideologies. This was in flagrant contradiction with the Bible which, at its heart manifestly speaks of an approach which rules out coercion, though what the biblical way is, where it comes from and how it is supposed to triumph remained, by and large, unclear to me at that time.

Now, as I have pointed out, conservative, liberal and socialist world-views constitute *civilisational* ideologies in that they are all rationalisations of sectional interests within society. As such they are characteristically domesticating, which is to say they seek to impose on civilisation what is projected as being a comfortable, stable and liveable situation for humanity as a whole. Indeed, all civilisational ideologies are sold to the general public on these terms. Thus, in the first place, conservative ideology paints a picture of a world in which responsibility is portrayed as a heavy burden that the strong are willing to shoulder for the benefit of the weak. In the second place liberal ideology portrays a world of freedom where all unnatural restraints are heroically removed, leaving everyone to compete equally in striving after higher and yet higher goals. Thirdly, for its part socialist ideology describes a world of solidarity where each person contributes from his or her worth and everyone receives according to his or her needs. As I see now my secret hope in understanding the Bible was to find within it yet another comfortable, domesticating ideology, one which was only different from those mentioned above in somehow miraculously finding equal room for the basic aspirations of *every* sectional interests within society. Of course, part of me knew very well that this would not turn out to be the case, for the Bible is littered with material that suggests there have always been hosts of people who do not find its way attractive, the problem not being in coming to terms with a higher truth that is inherently difficult to understand but rather in doing something which is glaringly obviously right but which is simply out of the question for purely selfish reasons. Needless to say my quest has now finally brought me face to face with the unpalatable truth that the Bible presents us with a marginal perspective in which all comfortable, domesticating civilisational worldviews are seen as being nothing but self-serving pretence and hypocrisy. The Bible tells us that rightly understood we are sojourners in this world so the object of the exercise isn't to find a way of establishing ourselves comfortably within it but rather to learn to care about one another, starting with those who for whatever reason have lost out.



## Chapter 1.

### The Problem of the Historical Jesus

As Albert Schweitzer famously demonstrated, the ‘lives of Jesus’ constructed by 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians revealed more about the diversity of theological opinion at that time than they did about Jesus himself. The 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘quest for the historical Jesus’ which Schweitzer set in motion was based on the conviction that only historical scholarship untainted by theological reflection could hope to isolate the real figure of Jesus. However, looking back from a vantage point at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can now clearly see that the work of historical scholarship over the last hundred years has produced an equally wide variety of conflicting results, leading John Dominic Crossan to describe them as something of a bad joke.<sup>10</sup> As A.K.M. Adam writes:

If historical-critical reconstruction presents us with a more *real*, more truly carnal Jesus than does every other approach to biblical interpretation, then just which Jesus is the real, carnal, one? Was Jesus a peripatetic Mediterranean Cynic? Was he a doom-saying apocalyptic prophet? Was he a Galilean Jewish miracle worker, or a Hellenistic magician? If he was, say, a Cynic philosopher, then the historical accounts which purport to demonstrate that Jesus is best understood as a Galilean holy man no more represent the real, carnal Jesus than does a docetist's theological projection. But if the historians who advocate the Galilean-holy-man Christology are right, the Cynic-philosopher historians have constructed an unreal phantasm. If historical-Jesus research protects us from erroneous judgements about Jesus' real, carnal humanity, how are we to protect ourselves from erroneous historical accounts?<sup>11</sup>

Adam points out that it was an obvious mistake to believe that historians would turn out to be any less prone to ideological distortion than the theologians.

The *trahison des clercs* argument implies that academic historians are less likely to be motivated by partisanship or ideology than are theologians. It assumes that historical scholarship renders surer, purer truths than does theological scholarship. Such claims, however, rest in thin air; historians are just as likely to construct an image of Jesus which suits their academic social setting as theologians are likely to construct a Jesus which suits their ecclesiastical setting.<sup>12</sup>

However, though Adam adequately identifies the problem facing questers of the historical Jesus he offers little help in dealing with it. He only appears to be interested in historical Jesus research insofar as this is seen to support orthodoxy and Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> But of course historical research cannot be conducted under such restraints. In the first place it has to go where the facts lead it and in the second it can make no pronouncements on matters of faith as regards their truth or falseness. Does this mean that biblical historians have to be left to operate without any restraints? From the way in which historians deal with the criticisms levelled against them by theologians one

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<sup>10</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus : The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1991) p. xxvii

<sup>11</sup> *Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology*. *SJT* Vol 49 No. 4 1996 p. 406

<sup>12</sup> *Docetism*, p. 399

<sup>13</sup> ‘... historical interpretation lacks the distinctive capacity to detect and root out docetism which alone could warrant enshrining historical exegesis as the primary criterion of the Church's interpretation of scripture. Classical docetism does indeed pose a threat to theologically sound reading, but we avoid these dangers by Chalcedonian interpretation, not by a historical rigor that is constrained in principle to examine only Christ's humanity.’ *Docetism*, p. 399

sometimes gets the impression that nothing less than complete liberty is what they are after. However, the amazingly contradictory results of their work over the last century does not give one much confidence that they are capable of handling this freedom. The suspicion therefore is that, just as students of theology have needed the guiding hand of orthodoxy over the years, so, too, students of history are going to need an equivalent restraining authority to guide their researches. That said it will, of course, be important to ensure that the restraint is both appropriate and self imposed (i.e. not inflicted by one discipline upon another).

The Chalcedonian definition and the early Christian creeds were invented by students involved in theological debate. As such they have a lot to say about the historical Jesus as an object of religious faith but little to contribute as regards an understanding of his ideological position, except by inference.<sup>14</sup> These factors make such creedal standards fundamentally unsuitable as a restraint on the historians' work. So if questers for the historical Jesus cannot be expected to use the Chalcedonian definitions to keep them on course, thus ensuring that they all arrive approximately in the same, 'right', place, is there anything else that will do the trick? Well, since the suspicion is that *ideological partisanship* is the reason why so many nineteenth century theologians and twentieth century historians have ended up producing falsified portraits of the historical Jesus, perhaps the problem is that they haven't allowed a correct understanding of Jesus' own ideological standpoint to control their efforts. If this is the case, as I believe it is, then what historians need to do is collectively to work out an authoritative understanding of Jesus' ideology, unclouded by any subsequent confession of faith. With the establishment of such a control they will then be able to put the various features of Jesus' ministry under the microscope and see how he worked out this ideology in the practicalities of his life.

However, before demonstrating how this might work let us first clear the ground a bit by taking a look at the ideological controlling mechanisms in the work of two well-known New Testament historians:

#### *E. P. Sanders*

In a general discussion on the importance of contexts in interpreting human actions Sanders writes:

Ideals and ideology also provide contexts, contexts that we carry around with us all the time, in our heads. These contexts are much trickier, since they are not places and events, but mental constructs. This makes them and their effects much harder to study, since we cannot read minds. Nevertheless, such contexts exist and exert power over human actions. ... Such ideological contexts are interesting historically: looking back, we can see that people viewed an activity as fitting in, and this explains their behaviour. Ideological outlook is also a context that helps shape actual behaviour in the here and now.<sup>15</sup>

Sanders summarises the gospel writers' ideology thus:

The gospels present Jesus as the person who fulfils the hopes of Israel and through whom God will save the world. That is, they put him in the context of the 'history of salvation', taken

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<sup>14</sup> I use the word ideology in a restricted sense to mean the way in which key political concepts (conservative, liberal or radical ideas) colour peoples' entire thinking. See pp. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press: London, 1993) p. 79



directly from the Hebrew Bible and adapted. This history runs as follows: *God called Abraham and his descendants, gave them the Law through Moses, established Israel as a kingdom in the time of Saul and David, and punished Israel for disobedience by exile; he will some day raise his people again, if need be by defeating their oppressors in war; many Gentiles will turn to worship him* (my italics, A.P.). This scheme is a Jewish theological construct, and it is presupposed in the gospels, but they expand and alter it slightly. The gospels were written in full knowledge of the fact that Jesus' own movement was spreading much better among Gentiles than among Jews. Thus in some ways they de-Judaized the scheme by emphasising Israel's partial rejection of Jesus and his acceptance by a few Gentiles.<sup>16</sup>

Reading these lines I am immediately curious about how Sanders selects his data. For example, on what criteria does he choose to include Saul - a relatively minor figure according to the tradition - while excluding Elijah whom it ranked alongside Moses? Or again, why does he associate Abraham with the business of calling rather than with the aspects of promise and covenant to which the texts give as much if not more significance? Again, in the Jewish salvation history the pivotal episode is God's rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt so how is it that this does not even merit inclusion in Sanders' scheme? And why has he chosen to stop suddenly at the exile, so ignoring God's restoration to their own land of those exiled?

I have no doubt Sanders would be able to make some sort of a case in defence of all these choices and moreover that he would argue that in constructing any summary some selectivity is necessary.<sup>17</sup> However, my intention is not to question specific choices he has made but to find out by what criteria he came to make them - considering that it is evident he has *not* been led by the texts themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Sanders' aim is to describe what he calls the overarching pattern of 'God's grand design' as witnessed to within the Hebrew Bible and his summary is simply an attempt to fit some of the salient biblical figures and incidents (including future ones!) into this underlying religious scheme:

God elected Israel (through the call of Abraham);  
Gave her Law (through Moses) and Kingship (through Saul and David);  
Punished her for her disobedience (through exile);  
Will some day raise her if need be by defeating her oppressors.  
As a result many Gentiles will turn to worship him.

But it seems to me that this knitting in of historical elements shown in brackets here was a big mistake. Had he been content to put forward just the bare scheme itself he would have found himself in good company. Isaiah produced a quite similar outline when he composed his song of the vineyard (Ch 5) as did Ezekiel when he created his allegory of the female child abandoned on the open field at birth (Ch 16). However, neither of these prophets tried to force biblical figures or events into their patterns and Sanders' attempt to do so has only succeeded in traducing these historical elements.

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<sup>16</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, p. 80

<sup>17</sup> 'The history (taken into account by the evangelists) is extremely selective, the key events come at very great intervals, and people often miss the fact that several centuries intervened between events. Moreover, several centuries drop out entirely ...' Sanders, *Figure*, p. 82

<sup>18</sup> I know of no one who would argue that the biblical tradition rates Saul above Elijah or Abraham's call above God's covenant with him and promises for the future.

The reason why this happens is fairly obvious. Any component within such a scheme is restricted to a partial role since the full role is played out by the scheme itself. In real life this is not the case. Here every historical character or group plays a full role, only in different circumstances and with differing degrees of success. Consequently if you force one of these into such a scheme you are bound to narrow the way it performs by concentrating attention on the partial role dictated by the position it occupies in the scheme, to the exclusion of all the others.

This explains why Sanders has to leave out the exodus event and the return of the exiles from his summary. In his scheme the salvation role is played by God's anticipated final act of deliverance and, because this is the case, there can be no question of allowing other salvation events to intervene and steal its thunder. So, however important they were in the tradition the exodus and the return of the exiles had to be jettisoned. Similar explanations can be given regarding all the other peculiarities of Sanders' summary.

Though Sanders was ill advised, so it seems to me, to try to include biblical figures and events in his description of God's grand design, this would not necessarily have invalidated his scheme as such. However, the scheme itself is critically flawed since it wrongly centres attention on Israel rather than on the world. Only at the last minute does it attempt to turn things round by introducing the Gentiles. Because of this, Sanders' description of God's grand design lacks a purpose - rather a contradiction in terms. God elected Israel and gave her law and kingship, *for what purpose* Sanders does not say. He then punished and exiled her, *for what failure* Sanders never discloses. He will some day raise her up and some Gentiles will turn to worship him *but Sanders never tells us why*. For the scheme to have carried conviction it should have kicked off with the proper focus:

God called Israel, his chosen agent, *to be a light to lighten the Gentiles* (for example).

*He showed her the way to live* by giving her the Law

When she became overrun by the surrounding nations he gave her the kingship *for her protection*.

*When she gave way to temptation and started to live like all the other nations* he punished her and sent her into exile.

*But he will have mercy on her* and some day raise her up, defeating her enemies.

*As a result of her newly found faithfulness* the Gentiles will turn to worship him.

But couldn't this same criticism be levelled against the prophetic schemes? I think not. Unlike Sanders, Isaiah and Ezekiel were not attempting, in their stories, to present God's grand design for humanity. They were concerned with something more specific: *to confront their fellow Israelites with the appalling fact of their sin in breaking the covenant, and the inevitable devastating consequences*. In this respect the position of Israel vis-à-vis the rest of the world was not strictly pertinent. That is not to say that this particular aspect is absent from their prophecies as a whole but simply that it would have been out of place within the narrow confines of their stories.

There is a final and even more crucial criticism to be laid against Sanders' summary of the gospels' ideology: unlike the prophetic stories it contains no inkling of the *political character* of Yahweh, of why he chose *the Hebrews* to be his 'light to the Gentiles' - *a community of powerless and marginalised nonentities without worth or prospects*, and of why he chose to function in the bizarre way he did - *through the yearnings and*

*suffering of those who were weak and excluded rather than through the aspirations and driving force of those who were strong and at the centre of things.*

As I see it Sanders' summary constitutes a dry belief-scheme rather than a full-blooded ideology. For in ignoring the crucial political question of radical solidarity (i.e. the fundamental Mosaic belief, shared by Jesus, that humans can properly defend their collective interests only by exerting their power and human creativity in such a way as to banish marginalization within the community: that is, by loving God<sup>19</sup> and your neighbour as yourself<sup>20</sup>) he has emptied the gospel (and indeed the Bible as a whole) of its vitality and presented a narrow religious portrait of Jesus that is lifeless and dull. The implication is not, of course, that he ignores the power question altogether for he certainly sees Jesus as making moral and ethical pronouncements. The criticism, rather, is that Sanders ignores the ideological performance in which *Jesus defends his own personal and collective interests by choosing to take the side of the marginals.*<sup>21</sup> Because of this blind spot Sanders is unable to see that Jesus' ethical and moral pronouncements were simply manifestations of his open, uncompromised<sup>22</sup> and unpretending attitude to life,<sup>23</sup> an attitude which enables any person, whether he or she is a believer or not,<sup>24</sup> to see that enlightened self-interest dictates that a proper caring for oneself means caring for others, beginning with those left outside. Instead, he can only see these ethical and moral pronouncements religiously, as curiously disembodied notions revealed to a human figure from on high and offered by him to others under divine authority.<sup>25</sup>

### *Crossan*

J.D. Crossan summarises his own position thus:

*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* proposed that the historical Jesus proclaimed and performed the kingdom of God, and empowered others to do likewise, as a community of radical egalitarianism negating not only the ancient Mediterranean's pivotal values of honour and shame, patronage and clientage, but culture and civilisation's eternal round of hierarchies, discrimination, and exclusions. That vision and program was focused, as it had to be for a peasant talking primarily if not exclusively to other peasants, on the body. It emphasised free healing, or egalitarian sharing of spiritual and religious resources, and open commensality, or the sharing of material and economic resources.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Not just any old god but the *God of the Marginals*. See below.

<sup>20</sup> Deut 6.5, Lev 19.18, Mk 12.28-31

<sup>21</sup> Some will find such a statement hard to take since people are not used to thinking about Jesus as someone who had personal, let alone collective, interests, to say nothing about his having a desire to defend them as well. However, this is simply a collective blind spot, for all of us are perfectly aware that every human being has personal and collective interests as well as an innate desire to defend them, so why not Jesus? Since orthodoxy rightly insists that Jesus was a human being it stands to reason that he must have been so equipped, the only question being what these interests were and how he chose to defend them; hence my formulation above.

<sup>22</sup> I.e. in Gospel terms 'unhypocritical'.

<sup>23</sup> This is what the Gospels mean by having 'faith'.

<sup>24</sup> For example Syro-Phoenician women [Mt 15.21-28] and Roman centurions [Mt 8.5-13].

<sup>25</sup> What we see here is the usual clerical (priestly or academic) betrayal in which the biblical material is understood religiously rather than, as it should be, ideologically.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig *Jesus and Faith: A conversation on the work of John Dominic Crossan, Author of The Historical Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) p. 1

In this way Crossan makes it clear that in drawing his portrait of Jesus he is not afraid to describe him politically. However, there is one thing about Crossan's portrait of Jesus that is odd: the curiously unbiblical nature of the material he draws on to construct his ideological armature. On the structural side Crossan hardly discusses the three foundations of Jewish/biblical political life: *law*, *kingship*, and *temple*. On the theoretical side he works things out primarily<sup>27</sup> on the basis of the idea of 'equality', a notion with precious little, if indeed any, biblical remit.<sup>28</sup> This curious silence about the Jewish/biblical background to the ideological question can hardly be claimed as accidental since it is determined very largely by Crossan's methodology<sup>29</sup> which seems expressly designed to overplay Hellenistic influence and underplay Jewish influence on Jesus' ideology.

Jesus has been interpreted in this book against the background of inclusive rather than exclusive Judaism. It is not, however, the elite, literary, and sophisticated philosophical synthesis of a Philo of Alexandria. It is, rather, the peasant, oral, and popular philosophical praxis of what might be termed, if adjective and noun are given equal weight, a Jewish Cynicism.<sup>30</sup>

One can understand Crossan's desire to include Hellenistic or Greco-Roman history in the background Judaism against which he wishes to interpret Jesus but where in his work does he announce the *Jewish/biblical element* of his portrait? I certainly can't find it. However, one has to give him credit. Because he makes politics and the question of 'power and human creativity' the cornerstone of his understanding<sup>31</sup> he is able to achieve a full-blooded portrait of the historical Jesus, in striking contrast to the anaemic and narrowly religious one provided by Sanders. But the important question remains about his portrait's ideological basis since the suspicion is that he has got these political ideas from illicit sources – either from our modern preoccupations or from ancient Hellenism. In short, where Sanders has drawn his portrait of Jesus against the backdrop of a religious scheme which though biblical (in the sense of pertaining to the Jewish scriptures) is almost entirely lacking in political content,<sup>32</sup> Crossan presents a full-blooded political portrait which, unfortunately, is scarcely biblical at all!

### *A political and biblical portrait*

But why should Jesus' ideology be determined biblically? For though Sanders is certainly right in saying the evangelists viewed him from a biblical perspective what reason have we to suppose that he viewed himself in this manner? In the absence of any clear indication of how he viewed his own work isn't Crossan right to see Jesus simply as a man of his own day and milieu? What I have described here is in fact two questions masquerading as one, thereby creating a deal of confusion. Whether Jesus should be seen as a man of his own day and milieu is a *cultural* question which

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<sup>27</sup> I note that Crossan, of course, does mention the ideas of 'discrimination' and 'exclusion'. However, it is clear that these are subsidiary and derivative notions in his work, 'equality' being the fundamental notion from which everything else springs.

<sup>28</sup> See p. 66 below.

<sup>29</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. XXVIII - XXXIV

<sup>30</sup> Carlson and Ludwig *Jesus and Faith*, p. 421

<sup>31</sup> In the form of egalitarianism, meaning inclusive free healing and open commensality.

<sup>32</sup> It would be quite wrong of course to suggest that the evangelists' portrait of Jesus is in any way lacking in political content.

naturally has to be answered in the affirmative. Of course Jesus should be seen as a Jewish peasant operating in a fundamentally Hellenistic or Greco-Roman environment. But this is no answer to the question as to whether or not Jesus' ideology should be determined biblically – by some controlling political idea he found within the traditions of his people. For this is an *ideological* matter and culture is not necessarily the major factor in determining an individual's ideology. If Sanders is right in believing that Jesus' ideology must be determined biblically, by some controlling political idea within the tradition, then Crossan's naming of Jesus' praxis as 'Jewish Cynicism' would appear to be somewhat dubious.

But we must not get too far ahead of ourselves. We must stay with the question whether Jesus' ideology was determined biblically (by some key political idea he found within Jewish tradition) since this is the crux of the matter and *everything* will depend on the way in which we answer it. First of all we must ask ourselves what is involved in seeing Jesus' ideology in this manner? Without actually attempting to spell out the biblical ideology<sup>33</sup> (which after all is the overall objective of this book) suffice it to say that the biblical ideology is really just another name for the character of Israel's god as this is spelled out in the Torah. In other words to declare that Jesus operated with a biblical ideology is to say that he viewed the world, and his activity within it, in terms strictly dictated by the dealings of this god, Yahweh, with his people, as these dealings are recounted in the Torah.

*An ideology requiring fulfilling or perfecting?*

Such an understanding is, of course, problematic for a scholar like Sanders because, while he clearly wants to maintain that Jesus' ideology was biblical in this sense, he also wants to argue that Jesus was in certain situations prepared to act beyond it.<sup>34</sup> Not that Jesus was intent on introducing a new religion but that he was concerned to perfect the old inadequate one.<sup>35</sup> N.T. Wright, following along the same lines as Sanders,<sup>36</sup> explains that this 'inadequacy' was not a flaw built into the Law from the beginning. It was rather something which only became apparent in the new situation which arose when God acted to bring in his new dispensation.<sup>37</sup> Given this understanding it seems to

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<sup>33</sup> The key political idea which generally colours the Bible.

<sup>34</sup> 'Jesus' case briefly put, that he was God's spokesman, knew what his next major action in Israel's history would be, and could specify who would be in the kingdom – put him equally obviously against any reasonable interpretation of scripture.' Sanders *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985) p. 280. See also pp. 206-10 concerning Jesus' unlawful admission of sinners into his group, pp. 75-6 concerning his prediction of the destruction of the Temple, and pp. 252-255 concerning his instruction not to bury the dead.

<sup>35</sup> 'Jesus did not oppose the Mosaic law, but held it in some ways to be neither adequate nor final.' Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 263.

<sup>36</sup> 'I completely agree with Sanders that 'Jesus challenged the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation' at various points, on the grounds that the day for the new dispensation was now dawning.' Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London: S.P.C.K 1996) 382-3.

<sup>37</sup> 'Sanders himself recognizes, the question cannot be simply, did Jesus support the law or undermine it? What was at stake was his implicit, and sometimes explicit, claim: that in and through his own work Israel's god was doing a new thing, or rather *the* new thing, that for which Israel had longed. And when that happened everything would be different. Torah could regulate certain aspects of human behaviour, but it could not touch the heart. That did not constitute a criticism of Torah; Torah operates in its own sphere. But when the promises of scripture were fulfilled, then the heart itself would be changed, and the supreme position of Torah would in consequence be relativized. What was at stake was *eschatology*, in

me that we have to allow for three possible general types of answer to our question as to whether Jesus' ideology was determined biblically:

1. Either Jesus operated on a completely different basis, out-with the Torah.
2. Or Jesus operated on the basis of an improved or perfected Torah.
3. Or Jesus operated on the basis of the Torah.

Leaving option 3 aside for the moment (after all the obvious choice, which nevertheless no historian I know of chooses!) it is interesting to note that while there are any number of scholars who go for option 2 there are precious few nowadays who overtly adopt option 1.<sup>38</sup> It is true that Wright points the finger at the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner<sup>39</sup> while also indicating grave suspicions about the position of Mack and Crossan – both of whom argue for a Cynic understanding of Jesus<sup>40</sup> – but those are the only renegades he mentions. It seems clear therefore that most historians now would agree that an espousal of option 1 puts a person out of bounds since it is flagrantly at variance with any sustainable reading of the texts.<sup>41</sup> In this respect it is rather like Brandon's suggestion that Jesus was a revolutionary – interesting as a theoretical possibility but not an argument to be taken seriously, given the evidence.

So we shall dismiss Option 1. When we do this we find ourselves facing a rather different and, indeed, fundamentally more interesting question. What we initially wanted to know was whether Jesus operated on the basis of a biblical ideology of some sort. Since it is now agreed by everyone still 'in the game' that of course he did, our question becomes one about the particular way in which he related to this biblical ideology. Was Jesus trying to upgrade it, to make it more adequate for some supposedly new situation (Option 2, here re-labelled Strategy 1)? Or was he on the contrary using

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the sense already argued, not a comparison between two styles or patterns of religion.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 380. See also Sanders '... It was Jesus' sense of living at the turn of the ages which allowed him to think that the Mosaic law was not final and absolute.' *Judaism*, p. 267 'Jesus himself looked to a new age, and therefore he viewed the institutions of this age as not final, and in that sense not adequate.'

*Judaism*, p. 269

<sup>38</sup> '[Sanders] seeks to reject utterly the anachronistic idea that Jesus was teaching a religion, or a theology, which was 'superior' to that of Judaism.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 382.

<sup>39</sup> 'A third way of arguing that Jesus and the Pharisees were not really opposed to one another is that of the remarkable Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner. Jesus, in his view, was setting up nothing less than a completely different religious system. 'Christianity and Judaism, in their first statements' - and the first Christian statement is, for Neusner, made by Jesus himself - 'really do represent different people talking about different things to different people.' It is interesting to note that Neusner, with this move, ascribes to Jesus what Vermes and others have left to Paul, namely the first attempt to establish something we can call 'Christianity' over against something we can call 'Judaism'. Unlike most other twentieth-century Jewish scholars who have written on the topic, he produces a Jesus who places himself at some distance from, though not in direct controversy with, his Jewish contemporaries. But this picture, though having the apparent contemporary merit of enabling Jewish-Christian dialogue to proceed in a detached way, as it were at arm's length, has little to commend it historically.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 375

<sup>40</sup> 'I am not saying (though, as we noted ... some writers [i.e. Mack and Crossan] today come perilously close to saying it) that Jesus rejected his own religious culture.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 385

Since Mack and Crossan are clearly more interested in discussing behaviour than ideology it is difficult for anyone to be *absolutely* certain what the ideological implications of Jesus' so called Cynicism are ... if any.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Wright: 'Some English colleagues question whether one should give so much space to these authors (i.e. Mack and Crossan), since their views appear, from East of the Atlantic, unbelievable to many.' *Victory*, p. 35 n. 23.

it, much like the prophets had done, to expose<sup>42</sup> Israel's hypocrisy; demonstrating by his own fulfilment of the requirements of the Law that others, under a pretence of upholding the covenant, were in fact deliberately and consistently breaking it (Option 3 here re-labelled Strategy 2)? In short was he perfecting the Law as the embodiment of the Bible's ideology or was he simply fulfilling it?

*Why either/or?*

In setting up the question as being between two incompatible hypotheses for Jesus' central strategy I am aware that many people may query this either/or construction. They will ask why it is not possible to see Jesus as *both* fulfilling the Law *and* as perfecting it? The answer is that if you fulfil the Law then you show that you are in favour of it and are working within it whereas if you perfect the law then you show that you are critical of it and are working, at least to some extent, outside of it. Logically therefore you cannot fulfil the law and perfect it *at the same time*. Of course it would have been by no means impossible for Jesus to have done both of these jobs but at some point he would have had to stop fulfilling the Torah and start behaving in some important way differently in order to perfect it. So if an historian wishes to argue that Jesus both fulfilled the old standard and instituted a new perfected one then it behoves him or her to indicate at what point in his ministry Jesus changed horses. I have come across no historian who attempts to include fulfilment aspects in his portrait of Jesus by pin-pointing such a moment of strategy-change. That said, N. T. Wright does attempt to include something of the fulfilment strategy in Jesus' work; however, he does so by fudging the issue:

'It may well be, as we shall see, that Jesus did and said things which were rightly perceived as revolutionary. But he was not simply offering *an alternative in kind* to Judaism, an entirely different 'religion' in style as well as content. He was claiming, as we have seen all along, to be announcing that the central aspirations of the Jewish people were coming to pass, though not in the way they had expected. He was proposing fulfilment, not mere novelty. And, like all other such proposals within Judaism (and we must stress the word 'within'), it was the character of that proposed fulfilment that led inevitably to controversy.'<sup>43</sup>

In fact the pretence is somewhat transparent. Notice that he does not come down firmly on the side of the fulfilment/exposure – Strategy 2 – by writing that 'Jesus was proposing fulfilment not novelty'. Rather he tries to have his cake and eat it by introducing the word 'mere': 'Jesus was proposing fulfilment, not *mere* novelty'! But at the end of the day Wright takes his stance firmly with Strategy 1, there being no hint in his entire work of Jesus acting to expose the situation in first century Palestine. Here in this passage it seems to me that he only toys with the word fulfilment as if to try to convince us that he can handle it, presumably because he cannot deny that it is there in the texts. Perhaps he doesn't really want to have anything to do with an idea that is so closely associated with the dreadful business of exposure?

I cannot overemphasise the importance of what is at stake here in this stark choice between incompatible hypotheses for Jesus' central strategy. In my opinion there is no consideration in this book which is more important because everything, including all

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<sup>42</sup> See my book *Light Denied*, Chapter 10 pp. 237ff.

<sup>43</sup> Wright, *Victory*, 375-6

the questions we shall subsequently find ourselves asking of the biblical texts, as well as the answers, will be dictated by the judgement we make. And we should not allow ourselves to be influenced by the fact that, while many twentieth century scholars have found time to raise the relatively bogus question as to whether Jesus was intent on introducing a new religion, few (if any) have raised this decisive question as to *whether Jesus was not concerned precisely to expose what was going on, by himself fulfilling the standard all pretended to accept*. For in dealing with the Bible has it not almost always been the case that the crucial matter is that which has been swept under the carpet?



## Chapter 2.

### Jesus Perfecter of the Mosaic Dispensation?

#### *Discipline or Ideological Struggle?*

We ended the last chapter faced with a stark choice between rival hypotheses about Jesus' central strategy. Because the matter is so important it will be as well if we focus the issue by highlighting the salient difference in character between them. Whereas the perfecting strategy essentially involves *ideological struggle* – the imposition of a new standard on an old one – the fulfilment strategy essentially involves *discipline* – the exposure of the human situation by measuring behaviour against a standard everyone accepts but tends to ignore. Another way of highlighting this same difference is to point out that whereas the perfecting strategy is *proactive* – in that it involves the proffering of a new standard which people must then accept or reject solely on the authority of a speaker and the evidence which he/she provides – the fulfilment strategy is essentially *reactive* – in that it involves the exposure of behaviour which people must then judge by measuring it against a standard which they themselves already claim to espouse.

#### *The Perfecting Strategy and Ideological Struggle*

With this precision in mind we must now review the cases for and against each hypothesis, remembering that it is in the light of the evidence rather than our own ideological predisposition<sup>44</sup> that they must be judged. We will be dealing in this chapter with the perfecting strategy. This hypothesis stands or falls by whether it can be shown that Jesus operated with a proactive, new-dispensation understanding: his belief that in his ministry God was acting anew, making the old Mosaic standard inadequate.<sup>45</sup> Biblical historians have attempted to demonstrate the existence of this new-dispensation versus inadequate old-dispensation feature within the texts by citing a number of passages:

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<sup>44</sup> The account which I give of the debate between these strategic positions is inevitably somewhat lopsided. For though I am all too well aware of the arguments *against the perfecting of the Law strategy* – since they are mine – I am unaware of those *against the exposure of behaviour strategy* since modern scholarship has maintained a deadly silence on this matter. See *Light Denied*, Chapter 11.

<sup>45</sup> 'The question is not so much whether or not we can find a record of some *de facto* disobedience of the obvious meaning of the Scripture - which in and of itself would be only moderately interesting - but whether or not there is evidence that Jesus *consciously challenged the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation.*' Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 250.

1. *The idea of perfecting in Jesus' 'New Patch on an old Garment',<sup>46</sup> 'New Wine in Old Wineskins'<sup>47</sup> and 'New Wine and Old Wine'<sup>48</sup> stories.*

Noting the evangelists' connection of these parabolic sayings with the discipline of fasting N. T. Wright comments:

Fasting in [Jesus' day] was not, for Jews, simply an ascetic discipline, ... It had to do with Israel's present condition: she was still in exile. ... Zechariah's promise<sup>49</sup> that the fasts would turn into feasts could come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people. That, of course, was precisely what Jesus' cryptic comments implied:

The wedding guests cannot fast while they have the bridegroom with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast ...

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh skins.

In other words ... the time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. Jesus' acted symbol, feasting rather than fasting, brings into public visibility his controversial claim, that in his work Israel's hope was being realized; ... Those who had got so used to living in exile that they could not hear the message of liberation were deaf indeed. This seems to be the meaning of Luke's addition in 5.39<sup>50</sup>.

If it could be convincingly demonstrated that in these parables Jesus was comparing *new conditions demanding new ideological considerations* with *old conditions subjected to old ideological considerations* then these texts would conclusively vindicate the perfecting strategy, as Wright maintains. However an examination of their thrusts shows this to be quite impossible. All three stories highlight the unpleasant and demanding characteristics of that which is new as opposed to the comfortable and undemanding characteristics of that which is old.<sup>51</sup> So if Jesus was referring to his own *oeuvre* as opposed to that of Moses (which I think is very likely if not absolutely certain) then the humorous revelations he was making must have had to do with the unpleasant, raw-newness of his demands as over against the comfortable, timeworn demands of Moses. This being the case *no ideological comparison could have been intended* since the implication would have been that in his own day Moses' demands could well have been just as new, raw and unattractive as those of Jesus.<sup>52</sup>

Wright, however, argues that given the context in which the three parables appear they *have* to be understood as referring to the new conditions applying in a new dispensation.<sup>53</sup> According to the evangelists Jesus used the stories to reply to critics

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<sup>46</sup> Mk 2.21

<sup>47</sup> Mk 2.22

<sup>48</sup> Lk 5.39

<sup>49</sup> Zech 8.19

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 433-4

<sup>51</sup> Each story uses this feature in a different way. In the patched garment there is the question of ruining something old and valued by inappropriately mending it with something unsuitably new. In the wine and wine-skins there is the question of correctly pairing items, harshly new things being kept in their appropriate place i.e. within new containers. In the new wine/old wine story there is the question of not foolishly expecting people to actually like unpalatable new things.

<sup>52</sup> Wright shows a complete disregard for the 'logic' of the New Wine Old Wine parable for he interprets it as meaning that the people 'who had got so used to living in exile that they could not hear the message of liberation were deaf indeed.'

<sup>53</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 433

who accused him of failing to instruct his disciples to fast. Citing Zechariah's promise that fasts would turn to feasts only when Yahweh restored the fortunes of his people, Wright claims that Jesus was clearly referring to this situation when he made these, as they stand, cryptic parabolic statements. But what Wright does not admit is that such an assertion begs several important questions. First, it is by no means certain that Zechariah considered the new conditions he foretold would amount to a new dispensation: a 'new age' in which Torah would no longer be seen as adequate. Indeed I personally consider it altogether improbable, not to say impossible, that he did.<sup>54</sup> Second, it is equally questionable that the tradition was right in associating these parabolic sayings with 'fasting' (Most scholars believe the association, in the texts, of parable stories with particular events, is secondary). Third, it is by no means certain (to put it mildly) that Wright's understanding of the stories' thrusts is correct. He seems to think the patched garment and the wine and wineskins sayings are simply cryptic assertions that the moment of Yahweh's restoration of Israel had arrived. However, he never explains how he comes by this understanding and I personally can find no way of developing such a meaning from the stories themselves. The new wine/old wine parable he interprets as indicating that people had become so comfortably installed in 'exilic' conditions that they could not hear Jesus' liberating message. As usual, the trouble with this is that it takes no account of the story's 'logic' which is about people's natural distaste for the too-new – new wine, meaning *unfinished* wine i.e. the stuff extracted from the vat before the fermentation process is completed. What Wright demonstrates is that you can only make an argument for a new-dispensation understanding of these stories by completely disregarding their 'logics'.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps this is why Sanders, who is equally keen to defend the new-dispensation thesis, never tries to use these parables in evidence.

### *1. The idea of perfecting in Jesus' prediction of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple.*

Commenting on the various texts dealing with this subject<sup>56</sup> Sanders writes:

We seem here to be in touch with a very firm historical tradition, but there is still uncertainty about precisely what it is. Did Jesus *predict the* destruction of the temple (Mark 13.1f and par.) or *threaten* it (Mark 14.58 and elsewhere)? Did he mention destruction and rebuilding, or only the former? The christological use of the prediction that it would be rebuilt after three days is evident, but even so Jesus may have predicted just that, for the application to the resurrection is not always explicit (e.g. Mark 15.29 and par.). If Jesus either threatened or predicted the destruction of the temple and its rebuilding after three days, that is, if the saying in any of its forms is even approximately authentic, his meaning would be luminously clear: he predicted the imminent appearance of the judgement and the new age.<sup>57</sup>

Having closely analysed the texts he later gives his own conclusions:

Jesus publicly predicted or threatened the destruction of the temple, that the statement was shaped by his expectation of the arrival of the eschaton, that he probably also expected a new temple to be given by God from heaven, and that he made a demonstration which prophetically

<sup>54</sup> See for example Zech 9.11 As for you [Jerusalem] also, *because of the blood of my covenant* with you, I will set your captives free from the waterless pit. (My italics A.P.)

<sup>55</sup> For my analysis of Wright's habitual misinterpretation of the parables see *Light Denied* pp. 172-174.

<sup>56</sup> Mk 11.15-17, Mt 21.12-13, Lk 19.45-46, Jn 2.13-22, Mk 13.1-2, Mt 24.1-2, Lk 21.5-6, Mk 14.55-59, Mt 26.59-61, Mk 15.29-32, Mt 27.39-43, Act 6.11-14.

<sup>57</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 73

symbolized the coming event. ... He did not wish to purify the temple, either of dishonest trading or of trading in contrast to 'pure' worship. Nor was he opposed to the temple sacrifices which God commanded to Israel. He intended, rather, to indicate that the end was at hand and that the temple would be destroyed, so that the new and perfect temple might arise.<sup>58</sup>

If it could be demonstrated convincingly that in these texts Jesus was foretelling a new act of God in which he would rescind his covenant with Moses and at the same time institute a substitute, though superior, agreement with his people, then, as Sanders says, they would constitute conclusive proof that Jesus intended to initiate a new dispensation: a 'new age' based on a perfected biblical ideology. However, there is a difficulty facing those who would defend this two-dispensations thesis: the fact that it is never clear when the first dispensation is supposed to have ended and the second one to have begun. Did the new age arrive, for example, with the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert? Or was it with Jesus' baptism?<sup>59</sup> ... or the commencement of his ministry? ... or his death on the cross? Or was it rather with the day of the resurrection? ... or with Pentecost perhaps? The interesting thing is that the one point in time no one ever suggests is the day when the Temple was destroyed,<sup>60</sup> yet this seems to be the date we have on offer when reading these texts in a two-dispensation light!

Readers will possibly think that this is a rather trivial point, given that what is being proposed is a short cross-over period between dispensations corresponding *grosso modo* with Jesus' ministry. This being the case the precise pin-pointing of an *exact* date might not seem significant, necessarily. However, such an argument holds no water for though from the point of view of the early Church, as onlookers witnessing God's act in Jesus' ministry taking place over a certain length of time, such a cross-over period would have made perfect sense, it would have made no sense at all from Jesus' point of view since it would have involved him in conducting two incompatible performances at the same time: fulfilling the old standard and creating a new, perfected one. Insofar as Jesus acted to fulfil the conditions of the Mosaic covenant his behaviour would have been seen as falling short of that required by the new, perfected standard. So he could not have brought in the new, perfected standard by fulfilling the Mosaic covenant. At some point he would have had to stop fulfilling the Mosaic covenant and start behaving somehow differently, and such a dramatic change in strategy would hardly have gone unnoticed. So the question stands. When exactly did this hypothetical change supposedly occur?

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<sup>58</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 75. See also Wright in the same vein: 'Jesus' actions and words in the Temple thus functioned symbolically in more or less the same way as his actions and words concerning the Torah. In neither case was there a denial that the institution itself was good, god-given, and to be respected. In both cases there was an assertion that the time had come for the institution to be transcended; in both cases there was an accusation that the institution was currently operating in a way that was destructive both to those involved and, more importantly, to the will of YHWH for his people Israel. In both cases, this was typically Jewish (and typically first-century) critique-from-within. Sanders is right, in other words, to stress that what was at stake in both cases was Jesus' perception that the eschaton was dawning.' *Victory*, p. 433

<sup>59</sup> Luke 16.16 might be read as indicating such an idea but it is a notoriously difficult text to interpret and 16.17 seems to go on to exclude the idea that with Jesus the Law becomes dated.

<sup>60</sup> Presumably because it would mean that Jesus operated entirely within the old dispensation.

## Eschatological acts and the eschaton

Sanders and Wright agree that this prediction of a temple ‘not made with hands’, intended to replace the existing one which was about to be destroyed, was Jesus’ way of signifying that the eschaton was dawning. In order to weigh this statement we will have to clarify what is meant by the terms: eschatological and eschaton. Generally the word eschatological is used to characterise divine acts: situations in which that which lies outside the space-time continuum (the cosmos and its history) enters to act within it – the principle governing such eschatological acts being that they are not in principle historically verifiable but can only be witnessed and appreciated by faith. Take for example Cyrus’ decree allowing the exiles to return to re-establish a Judean state under Persian tutelage. This historical event became an eschatological act verifiable only by faith when Isaiah declared that what was *really* happening was that Yahweh was forgiving and restoring his people. The word *eschaton* is generally employed rather differently since it clearly defines a precise moment – the end of time – and not all eschatological acts involve the eschaton by any means. For example when Yahweh on mount Sinai gave Israel his law that was an eschatological act with no end-time association. The difference between ‘ordinary’ eschatological acts and these rarer moments of eschaton is that the former are appreciated only by faith whereas the latter are said to be universally evident. This is because at the eschaton the veil which clouds all matters associated with the space-time continuum is taken away and all is revealed. This difference becomes particularly clear when you consider the matter of judgement. All eschatological acts imply judgement since they affirm what is good and what is evil by clearly revealing the hidden grain of the universe. However, moments of eschaton constitute a last and final judgement from which there is no redress, not because of *force majeure*<sup>61</sup> but because the game is essentially over and the veil completely taken away. We have clear references to this eschaton in the Matthean explanations given of the parables of the tares and the fish net<sup>62</sup> as well as in the numerous parousia references inserted by early Christian editors into a number of other parables.<sup>63</sup>

Our problem is that neither Sanders nor Wright use the word ‘eschaton’ in this normal way.<sup>64</sup> Sanders’ argument is that after the decree of Cyrus the restoration brought about by Nehemiah and Ezra did not fulfil the grandiose visions of Isaiah, Micah and Ezekiel. As a result there existed a general view in the first century ‘that there would come a time when the dispersed of Israel would be *fully* restored, when a Davidic king would arise, when Jerusalem would be rebuilt, when the temple would be beautified, and when the nations would submit to Israel’s God’.<sup>65</sup> It is this future *completed* restoration process, and not a hypothetical end-of-the-world scenario, which Sanders and Wright refer to as the eschaton! Consequently, when they both suggest that this ‘temple not made with hands’ prophecy referred to the eschaton, all they are claiming is that Jesus was by it affirming that he was in the business of bringing about Israel’s full and final restoration.

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<sup>61</sup> There is clearly *force majeure* implied in Isaiah’s prophecy of Yahweh’s return to Zion and the punishment of Israel’s enemies, but no eschaton.

<sup>62</sup> Mt 13.24-30, 37-43; 47-50.

<sup>63</sup> Mt 25.46; 25.11-13; Lk.12.37; 12.43-48; 12.58-9; 13.25-30,

<sup>64</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 207-8

<sup>65</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 80

We can of course easily grant that Jesus saw his ministry in this light but it is not so easy to understand why Sanders and Wright both go on to make the additional claim that the ‘temple not made with hands’ prophecy also implied the imminent appearance of a new age *in which the Mosaic dispensation would be relativised*. For there is nothing about this to be found in the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah and Ezekiel. In fact they do not get this new-dispensation ‘new age’ idea from these prophecies or even from the pre-70 CE. Jewish apocalyptic tradition which Sanders examines in detail,<sup>66</sup> where it is also conspicuously absent.<sup>67</sup> Rather they get it from the prophecy itself which certainly seems to imply that a temple not made with hands is somehow superior to an artificial one, thus rendering the latter obsolete.<sup>68</sup> The problem with this prophecy, therefore, is not in seeing it in a new-dispensation light, which is a straightforward exercise, but in seeing it as an authentic saying of Jesus.

Both Sanders and Wright admit that there are genuine doubts about the saying.<sup>69</sup> However, there is one point they do not raise, which to my mind is crucial. If Jesus had wanted to compare unfavourably the extremely structured, ‘artificial’, Mosaic organisation (if one can speak of the Temple as being Mosaic) with his own loosely structured, ‘natural’ organisation he would hardly have combined it with a prediction of the destruction of the temple since the two messages would inevitably have become confused to the detriment of one of them.<sup>70</sup> Sanders and Wright seem to agree that Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple. This being the case we have to take this message as being the original one. Once this is established it is easy to see the second message – the unfavourable comparison of the artificial Mosaic organisation with that of the natural body-of-Christ – must be editorial: the result of the early Church looking back on Jesus’ life and coming to the conclusion that his was an eschatological achievement that wrapped up the Mosaic covenant and ushered in a new-dispensation ‘new age’. Indeed everything indicates that this new Temple not-made-with-hands should be seen as a faith statement of the early Church put into Jesus’ mouth and not an original saying of Jesus himself. What more likely scenario could there have been

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<sup>66</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 80-86.

<sup>67</sup> It is, of course, true that Jewish apocalypticists openly refer to a new age but it is not a *new-dispensation* new age they speak about, in which the Mosaic covenant is surpassed. Rather they dream of a *fulfilment* new age which God will signal by ending opposition to Israel’s demonstration of the Mosaic covenant.

<sup>68</sup> Sanders seems to believe that this temple was superior in being eschatological: ‘Thus we conclude that Jesus publicly predicted or threatened the destruction of the temple, that the statement was shaped by his expectation of the arrival of the eschaton, that he probably also expected a new temple to be given by God from heaven, ...’ *Judaism*, p. 75. It is difficult to know what he thinks is signified by such a stunt. (For another eschatological temple see also *Judaism*, p. 82). As I see it *every* temple as the dwelling place of a god is eschatological. However, Sanders seems to believe that an extra eschatological degree can be achieved by means of a new temple.

<sup>69</sup> ‘The christological use of the prediction that it would be rebuilt after three days is evident.’ Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 73 see also p.88; ‘The texts in the synoptic gospels which speak of rebuilding are those put in the mouth of the false witnesses at the hearing before the Sanhedrin.’ Wright, *Victory*, p. 425

<sup>70</sup> Wright himself argues that Sanders in emphasising the comparison angle between the temples ends up denying the destruction angle which he deems to be the most important: ‘Sanders rejects what I have argued already is the real motive behind the ... saying: Jesus’ analysis of the present plight of Israel in terms of her embracing violent resistance, and so incurring the wrath of YHWH in the form of Roman destruction. Instead, Sanders persists in asserting, on what seems to me a very slender basis, that the only real motive for Jesus’ symbolically ‘destroying’ the Temple is the prospect of its being rebuilt in some fairly literal sense’. Wright, *Victory*, p 425-6

than that this unstructured early Church should wish to declare that as the resurrected body of Christ it had replaced the temple?

3. *The idea of perfecting in Jesus' incoming eschatological kingdom.*

Though I believe there is no way of arguing convincingly that Jesus thought he was building an eschatological Temple (whatever that curious phrase of Sanders might mean) there is I believe plenty of evidence that he thought he was bringing in an eschatological kingdom. If it could therefore be established that in doing this he believed he was rendering the Mosaic dispensation *passé* this would certainly constitute proof that he saw himself as initiating a new-dispensation 'new age' based on a perfected biblical ideology. But is this the case? Citing the numerous passages in scripture foretelling a time when Yahweh will forgive his people and return to Zion to re-establish his rule,<sup>71</sup> and the striking similarities between these prophecies and Jesus' descriptions of what was taking place in his own ministry, Wright argues, correctly so it seems to me, that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling such prophecies. But what is there to suggest that either the prophets or Jesus saw in all of this anything which put a question mark against the Mosaic dispensation? Wright maintains that in these prophecies Yahweh is seen most unusually *as becoming Israel's king himself* and that it is this which demonstrates *the break with the Mosaic dispensation* which will eventually take place and that *it is precisely this break which Jesus claimed to be bringing about in his ministry, thus ushering in an eschatological new age.*<sup>72</sup>

The Kingdom and the new dispensation

But is Wright correct in thinking that 'the kingly reign of God', which both the prophets and Jesus clearly talked about, is the same thing as this 'new dispensation' which supposedly renders the Mosaic dispensation obsolete? I suggest that neither the prophecies of Yahweh's return to Zion nor Jesus' references to the coming kingdom of God can possibly be understood in such new-dispensation 'new age' terms. The reason I say this is really very simple. *All new-dispensation 'new-age' talk occurs when people are looking back in time.* This is because all such talk is the product of a dawning awareness that something has happened to bring about new conditions, making present behaviour no longer governable by past standards. In other words *such new-dispensation 'new-age' talk only occurs after the change engendering it has been effected since it is the product of experience not of expectation.* Our own references to Post-Modernism is a good example of such new-dispensation 'new-age' talk. Post-Modernism was never a goal towards which people saw themselves as striving; rather, it has been a realization people have achieved when, on looking back, they recognise that conditions have effectively changed, making it necessary now to find new standards to judge things by. This being the case it is simply not possible that the prophets and Jewish apocalypticists were thinking in this new-dispensation 'new-age'

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<sup>71</sup> See Wright, *Victory*, p. 616-619.

<sup>72</sup> 'I propose, as a matter of history, that Jesus of Nazareth was conscious of a vocation: a vocation, given him by the one he knew as 'father', to enact in himself what, in Israel's scriptures, God had promised to accomplish all by himself. He would be the pillar of cloud and fire for the people of the new exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God. Wright, *Victory*, p. 653

way, as Wright maintains, for they were looking *forward in expectation to some future date* when Israel would complete her God-given task. Their new-age references constitute fulfilment talk in which a time is envisaged when, thanks to God's intervention, Israel's attempts to operate as the light to lighten the Gentiles will no longer be thwarted either by external oppression or internal revisionism. What is more, the same argument holds true even for Jesus himself since he saw his work as finally bringing about the completion of the task to which Israel had been called. He was not looking back on something already accomplished which made for a completely different kind of future (a new-dispensation 'new age'). He had his eyes fixed on the prophetic future which for him was now his present. *He performed with the perspective of one living entirely within the bounds of the ending of an age*, having no thought at all for what was to come afterwards beyond an expectation that God would vindicate him. The early Church, on the other hand lived entirely at the beginning of a new age, looking back and realizing that because of what Jesus had achieved everything was somehow different, opening up a new future without the restrictions of, say, food laws and circumcision.

Since it is clear that the prophets were looking forward in hope to a day when Israel's age-old aspirations would finally be realised it would be vain for us to expect any such new-dispensation 'new-age' references in their work, and indeed none are to be found. Wright tries to argue that in foreseeing that Yahweh would one day become king of Israel *himself* the prophets were envisaging a change which would cause a break with the Mosaic traditions. But of course Yahweh is often portrayed in the Old Testament as acting himself when, historically speaking, the job was being performed by mere humans.<sup>73</sup> So the fact that the prophets picture Yahweh as becoming king in Israel in no way indicates that they had in mind some future eschatologically-run state (whatever that might mean). Indeed they make it abundantly clear that they are not talking about a radically new situation or new dispensation but rather something resembling a return to Israel's former state before corruption had set in:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts:  
My cities shall again overflow with prosperity,  
and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem."<sup>74</sup>

"I will bring them back because I have compassion on them,  
and they shall be as though I had not rejected them;  
for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them."<sup>75</sup>

"I will signal for them and gather them in, for I have redeemed them,  
and they shall be as many as of old."<sup>76</sup>

That said, it is certainly true that these prophecies include some very bold eschatological strokes which seem to indicate a radical break of some description:

"On that day there shall be neither cold nor frost.  
And there shall be continuous day,  
not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Cyrus's decision to allow the exiles to return to their own land.

<sup>74</sup> Zech 1.17

<sup>75</sup> Zech 10.6

<sup>76</sup> Zech 10.8

<sup>77</sup> Zech 14.6. See also 14.10, Zeph 3.13, Amos 9.14, Joel 2.28-29, Joel 3.18



“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;  
And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people;  
No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
Or an old man who does not fill out his days,  
For the child shall die a hundred years old,  
And the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
The lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
And dust shall be the serpent’s food.  
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”<sup>78</sup>

However, it would be wrong to take these passages as signs of ‘new-age’ thinking with all that this entails regarding a replacement of the Mosaic dispensation. Like other eschatological passages in these texts all that is being described is, on the one hand, the astonishing transforming power of the Yahwistic ideology which at some future date will be found ruling the roost and, on the other, the contrasting incapacity of peoples’ actual ideological affiliations to achieve the longed-for humanizing transformations. In other words the distinction which is being referred to in these passages is ideological, not structural. As such it has *nothing* to do with any supposed inadequacy within the structures created by Moses and *everything* to do with peoples’ hypocritical failure to put into effect their avowed ideological commitments.<sup>79</sup>

#### 4. *The idea of perfecting in Jesus’ expressions of sovereignty over the Law.*

So far we have dealt with aspects in the texts which are taken by some scholars to indicate that Jesus was introducing a new alternative to the old Mosaic structure. We now turn to look at aspects which, it is claimed, indicate that he directly challenged the provisions which he saw as being laid out in the Torah. This is generally done by referring to Jesus’ ‘sovereign’ attitude to the Law.<sup>80</sup> Sanders points out that there is a

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<sup>78</sup> Is 65.17-25. See also 4.5-6, 11.6-9, 13.10, 30.26, 35.5-10, 40. 3-5, 60.19-20,

<sup>79</sup> Of course Sanders (like Wright) disagrees: ‘Jesus himself looked to a new age, and therefore he viewed the institutions of this age as not final, and in that sense not adequate.’ *Judaism* p. 269. But this is only because he sees Jesus’ view as eschatological and because he defines ‘eschatological’ as meaning ‘new-age’, as here where he is dealing with Jesus’ action and saying against the Temple: ‘I have ... argued that the action and the saying are eschatological, that is, they point to the end of the old order and the coming of the new, and we see that in this conviction, Jesus could strike a blow at the existing Temple sacrifices.’ *Judaism*, p. 251. He doesn’t seem to understand that *eschatological thinking, whether it appears in Old Testament prophecy or in the mouth of Jesus cannot possibly have anything to do with new ages or dispensations*. The equation ‘eschatology = new age’ only operates in the thoughts of those looking back. For example, Israelites thinking about the exodus and the early Church thinking about the resurrection.

<sup>80</sup> e.g. N. A. Dahl ‘We know little with certainty about the motives that led the authorities to take legal steps against Jesus. But we can conjecture some things with good reason: Jesus’ sovereign attitude to the prescriptions of the law ... could appear to be a revolt against the established religio-political order.’ *The Crucified Messiah* (Minneapolis Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), p. 31-2; and Käsemann: ‘Jesus felt himself in a position to override, with an unparalleled and sovereign freedom, the words of the Torah and the authority of Moses.’ *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964

difference between the quite normal way in which people in first century Palestine found ways to circumvent laws which had become unacceptable even in those days, and this hypothetical, sovereign attitude to the Law:

‘... we know of various ways in which people could avoid the obvious meaning of the law without, however, admitting that they opposed it. Further, we see that some could make distinctions within the law. What is lacking from ancient Judaism is a parallel to the attitude attributed to Jesus: that he saw himself as sovereign over the law and as being able to decide that parts of it need not be obeyed’.<sup>81</sup>

One has the feeling that Sanders is slightly suspicious about this so-called sovereign attitude in that it makes Jesus out to be an original, someone unfettered by the need to base his stance on precedents:<sup>82</sup>

The unparalleled character of this view does not, to be sure, trouble a great many scholars. On the contrary! Here can be seen a novel point and one that distinguishes Jesus from others. He was conscious of unparalleled sovereignty, and rightly so.

In spite of such misgivings Sanders ends up justifying the notion<sup>83</sup> even while dismissing the old view that Jesus was fundamentally opposed to the Law.

#### Dead undertakers

But is it right for scholars to claim that Jesus displayed a sovereign attitude to the Law? There is one text which Sanders (following Martin Hengel<sup>84</sup>) takes as unequivocally demonstrating it: Jesus’ commandment to a would-be disciple to ‘Let the dead bury their dead’.<sup>85</sup> The argument here is that Jesus is flagrantly countering the Mosaic law to honour your father and mother. However, far from offering an unequivocal demonstration of this sovereign attitude I believe that no sensible argument about the law can be based on this text. For if we take it as an historical account of an actual incident we are obliged to conclude that it paints a picture of Jesus as a fool acting with disgraceful insensitivity. Since this flies in the face of everything which we know about him it seems certain that if Jesus ever did make the remark attributed to him – which I think quite likely – it was not in the sort of situation described by the evangelists. This being the case my disagreement with Sanders

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[German ed. 1960] p. 40; and Otto Betz: ‘Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees and the sovereign manner in which he dealt with the Law.’ *What Do We Know About Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968 [1965]), p. 83.

<sup>81</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 249.

<sup>82</sup> He is quite right to be suspicious. For Jesus, as he is presented to us in the Gospels, is not in the least bit *original* since he demonstrates no new ideas. The proper claim is that he was something quite different, viz *unique*.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Thus one can understand why scholars speak of Jesus’ ‘sovereign freedom’ over the law. He apparently did not think that it could be freely transgressed, but rather that it was not final. This attitude almost certainly sprang from his conviction that the new age was at hand. ... It was Jesus’ sense of living at the turn of the ages which allowed him to think that the Mosaic law was not final and absolute.’ *Judaism*, p. 267.

<sup>84</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers* (New York: Crossroads, 1981) ch. 1

<sup>85</sup> Mt 8.21-22, Lk 9.59-60. ‘At least once Jesus was willing to say that following him superseded the requirements of piety and the Torah. This may show that Jesus was prepared, if necessary, to challenge the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation’. Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 255. See also p. 267: ‘We have found one instance in which Jesus, in effect, demanded transgression of the law: the demand to the man whose father had died. Otherwise the material in the Gospels reveals no transgression by Jesus. And, with the one exception, following him did not entail transgression on the part of his followers.’

couldn't be sharper, for he strenuously argues that the saying *presupposes* the man's question:

It would not be imaginable that the request to go and bury one's father first was created as a frame for the saying to let the dead bury their dead. ... it is extremely unlikely that the later church would have created a setting which made Jesus sound so impious. The only realistic reading of the passage is to consider both the question and the answer authentic. This means that they apply to a real situation: the man's father is actually dead, and Jesus actually requires that the man follow him rather than bury his dead father.<sup>86</sup>

I take his point that as a general rule the early Church would not invent an incident which casts Jesus in a bad light. But what does it mean to take the incident described as a fair account of an actual historical event as Sanders says we must?

First, given the fact that the man clearly indicates his acceptance of discipleship and only asks for a postponement for a maximum of twelve hours (until sunset) Jesus reply would seem, on the face of it, to be an indication that some unexplained pressure of events put any sort of postponement out of the question.<sup>87</sup> If Jesus' intention was indeed to make such a point then the point itself was silly<sup>88</sup> and his manner in making it bizarre and insensitive in the extreme. Luke seems to recognize this for he describes the incident in such a way as to leave open an alternative way of understanding it. He does this by creating doubt in the minds of the reader as to whether the would-be disciple had in fact truly made up his mind to commit himself.<sup>89</sup> But even if it is granted that the man was secretly prevaricating Jesus' reply still makes no earthly sense.

In fact what do Jesus' cryptic words mean? Sanders and others suggest they imply that due to the pressure of eschatological events (within Jesus' ministry) new arrangements had to be introduced making old arrangements (the Law) inadequate. If this is the case then presumably Jesus in his cryptic statement is indicating that in these new circumstances the job of burying the dead has to be undertaken by a special class of people referred to as 'the dead' – professional undertakers? or perhaps women or slaves? Are we really supposed to take such a proposition seriously? But what if Jesus is referring to people who are ideologically screwed up? This is the way Wright seems to understand the saying:

The only explanation for Jesus' astonishing command is that he envisaged loyalty to himself and his kingdom-movement as creating an alternative family. Wright, *Victory*, p. 401.

I have to admit that this is an interesting suggestion. To appreciate the reasoning behind it we have to compare it with another saying which makes the point more obviously:

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<sup>86</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 253-4.

<sup>87</sup> 'The positive thrust [of the 'Let the dead bury their dead' saying is] a call to discipleship which is urgent and which overrides other responsibilities ...' Sanders *Judaism*, p. 253. According to Sanders the negative thrust is that it is 'opposed to Torah obedience'. p. 254.

<sup>88</sup> True, Jesus is reported on one famous occasion as prophesying, wrongly as it turned out, that there would not be enough time for his disciples to proselytise all Judea before the Son of Man would appear (Mt 10.23) but the idea that this individual would miss out on something important by taking time off to bury his father – given all that was to happen thereafter – is simply farcical.

<sup>89</sup> cf. 1Kings 19.19-21 where the same unconfirmed suspicion of doubt exists, though it is put forward in a much more subtle and intelligent way.

If any one comes after me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.<sup>90</sup>

Coming from the mouth of someone who instructed his followers to love their enemies there was no chance that people would have taken Jesus literally. They would clearly have understood him as forcefully indicating that disciples must reject the ‘family-first’ tradition: hating one’s father etc. being simply a concrete way of expressing this abstract idea. Wright’s argument (if I understand him correctly) is that Jesus’ cryptic phrase ‘let the dead bury their dead’ means ‘let those who uphold this screwed-up, family-first principle be the ones to honour it’. I have to say that such a reading makes perfectly good sense in itself. However, it contains one fatal flaw: there is no chance that anyone present would have understood that this was what Jesus was on about and certainly not the poor man who had just lost his father.

In describing this reading as ‘the only explanation for Jesus’ astonishing command’ Wright half admits this himself. I take his formulation to mean that this interpretation is not achieved naturally but rather *faut de mieux*: only because the other, more straight-forward readings make no sense. This being the case, though it is in itself quite sensible as an interpretation it is so strained as to be practically unworkable. For while it is easy to imagine people with concrete thought-forms having no difficulty in reading ‘hate your father’ as meaning ‘eschew at all costs the family-first tradition’, it is hard to imagine them instantly recognizing ‘dead buryers of the dead’ as meaning ‘people who in the new conditions brought about by Jesus’ ministry mistakenly continue to uphold the old family-first tradition and so merit the job of burying the community’s dead’.<sup>91</sup> This means that Jesus would have stood no chance at all of communicating such a message by means of this cryptic phrase. Indeed, in the case of this man who simply wanted to fulfil his filial duty the statement would have sounded grossly unsympathetic, not to say uncalled-for, for what was there in his behaviour to merit the reproach that he was inadmissibly prioritising his family? Quite frankly, Wright’s scenario is unimaginable.

Faced with such impossible alternatives I am inclined on this occasion to turn a blind eye to the criterion of dissimilarity and conclude that the tradition was indeed responsible for creating the scenario of the disciple who had just been bereaved as a frame for the ‘dead burying their dead’ saying.<sup>92</sup> Given my understanding of Jesus’ basic standpoint: that Israel’s job was not to try to force change on a recalcitrant world but rather, by her own way of behaving, to throw light on the proceeding so that people

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<sup>90</sup> Lk 14.26 c.f. Mt 10.37

<sup>91</sup> The reason for this is that it demands two separate identifications: in the first place that ‘dead’ means the ideologically unsound and in the second place, and entirely by inference, that ‘dead’ also means those who in the new conditions wrongly continue to honour the family-first tradition.

<sup>92</sup> One thing that my work on the parables has taught me is never to put much confidence in the contexts in which they are placed. People tend to work on the principle that these should be accepted as historical until it is proven otherwise. However, in the case of the parables it can actually be demonstrated that in a large majority of cases these scenarios can’t possibly have been original since they traduce the stories’ essential logics (their ‘if such and such a situation pertains then so and so will follow’ thrusts). Indeed everything indicates that the best approach to all of Jesus’ illustrative sayings is to work on the principle that the given scenarios are invented. Here we are not dealing with a parable but with a metaphor displaying Jesus’ typical hallmark: an enormous exaggeration in the illustration: his dead undertakers – see also swallowed camels, chopped off limbs and beams found in eyes.

could change their ways themselves,<sup>93</sup> my guess is (and it is *only* a guess) that in saying ‘let the dead bury their dead’ Jesus was probably attempting to get people to see that they should not rush about trying to clean up the mess created by ideological misrule. Rather they should allow such deeds to stand as public condemnations of their authors. In other words clearing up the mess created by ideological misrule was the business of those who created it, not of those bringing in the kingdom.

Sabbath healings etc.

But if nothing can be adduced about Jesus’ attitude to the Law from this ‘dead undertakers’ saying what about the controversies concerning Sabbath observance, ritual handwashing and kosher food? Interestingly, Sanders dismisses all of them, claiming first that as subjects of controversy they were the concern of the early Church rather than of pre-Christian Judaism, second that the incidents themselves are quite unrealistic and third that in any case none of them actually involve a transgression of the law. Take, for example, the Sabbath healings. Sanders argues that in all the incidents described Jesus is never shown as breaking the law about working on the Sabbath because ‘no work was performed’ in any of them.<sup>94</sup>

If Jesus had had to remove a rock which was crushing a man’s hand, there would have been a legal principle at issue: was the man’s life in danger, or could the work have waited for the sun to set? But the laying on of hands (Lk 13.13) is not work, and no physical action of any kind is reported in the other stories.

It certainly seems true to say that as far as Jesus’ opponents were concerned questions of Sabbath-day law-breaking were decided by defining what was meant by work. Indeed I will go with Sanders even further and agree that if he considers that Jesus’ compatriots would have defined work in terms of ‘physical action’ then he is probably right since he certainly knows more about the matter than I do! However, what I would like to point out is that Jesus would never have agreed that law-breaking was to be judged by such definitions. His question ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm ...?’ shows that he was not concerned to ‘keep the Sabbath’ by staying within properly defined rules. His concern was ‘to honour the Sabbath’ by living his life according to the spirit of Yahweh which it, as a structure, had been designed to enshrine.

This is such an important distinction that we should dwell on it for a moment. These contradictory ways of regarding the Jewish law are very similar to the different attitudes to the law generally expressed by those who govern and by those who are governed in our own society. Lawmakers see the law as an ideological expression; as a way of bringing in a better society – better, that is, according to their own ideas of the kind of society we should all want to work towards. In the same manner those who enforce the Law – the judges – tend to do so not strictly according to the actual letter of a given law but according to their understanding of what was the intention of those who passed it. On the other hand the governed tend to think of the law simply as rules within which they are obliged to operate or face the consequences. Because of this they still think of themselves as law-abiding citizens even when making strenuous

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<sup>93</sup> I am here anticipating my findings. See pp. 43-56 below. See also *Light Denied* Chapter 11.

<sup>94</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 266.

efforts to circumvent the law. The point I am making in drawing attention to this important distinction is that though Sanders may be right in saying that there is no rule-breaking, as such, in any of these Sabbath-day healing incidents, there is for all of that a crucial disagreement being raised about what constitutes breaking the Law: is it 'rule-breaking as defined by tradition' or is it 'failure to honour the spirit enshrined?' And this far more interesting question is one which Sanders ignores.

It seems that Jesus considered that it was not *he* but *his opponents* who were breaking the Sabbath Law *by thinking of it in terms of keeping within the rules*. He described such behaviour as hypocrisy, seeing it as a way of avoiding Yahweh's demands. For Jesus, the Law was the vehicle which enabled Israelites to meet with Yahweh and encounter his spirit. For his opponents it was something which stood between them and Yahweh, moderating his demands and making it possible to hide from his exigencies. So for Jesus' opponents breaking the Law was quite simply failing to keep within its rules. For Jesus himself breaking the Law was failing to honour it by using such rules to hide from its underlying demands.

Like Jesus' opponents Sanders also analyses these Sabbath-day healings strictly in terms of keeping within the rules, thereby ignoring Jesus' criticism of such behaviour. In this way he not only puts himself dangerously in the wrong camp but also avoids the important question we are all asking: Does Jesus in these Sabbath healings demonstrate a sovereign attitude to the Law when he insists that people should seek to honour the Law rather than to keep safely within its rules? The answer is that of course he doesn't since the very concept of a sovereign attitude implies acting as someone who is above the Law, acting as someone who can disregard the rules as traditionally defined, and get away with it. Jesus would never have seen himself as doing such a thing, since for him breaking the Law meant defying the revealed spirit of Yahweh. In other words the very fact of raising the question of a sovereign attitude, as so many scholars do, demonstrates that you are pitting yourself ideologically against Jesus – still judging matters in the terms proposed by his opponents and refusing to judge them as he insisted people should.

## Divorce

One instance in which Jesus appears to mark himself off from the Mosaic tradition is over the matter of divorce.<sup>95</sup> Once again Sanders is quick to point out that there is no question of law-breaking here since in his estimation Jesus imposes a greater stringency by forbidding divorce altogether and it is a general principle in first-century Judaism 'that greater stringency than the Law requires is not illegal.'<sup>96</sup> However, he does maintain that the incident shows that Jesus saw himself as living at the turn of the ages and as introducing a new order which demonstrated that the Mosaic dispensation was not final.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Mat 5.31-32; Lk 16.18; Mat 19.3-9//Mk 10.2-12

<sup>96</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 256

<sup>97</sup> 'The prohibition of divorce ... points to a new order. ... It was Jesus' sense of living at the turn of the ages which allowed him to think that the Mosaic law was not final and absolute.' Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 267

In all of this Sanders clearly shows that here too he is thinking in legalistic terms, where legalism is defined as obeying the Law simply by staying within the rules as traditionally defined. This is shown in his argument with Stephan Westerholm about the word 'statute', which is so fascinating that I will quote it in full:

It is not the case in Jewish law that everything not forbidden is required. Moses did not *command* divorce, he permitted it; and to prohibit what he permitted is by no means the same as to permit what he prohibited. Westerholm, who employs this passage in his argument that Jesus did not deal with the law as statute, does not adequately explain what is and is not a statute in the Mosaic law. Since the point seems to be often misunderstood we should briefly consider it. In Deut. 24.1-4 there is a clear statute: a man may not remarry a wife whom he had divorced if she subsequently was married to somebody else. This applies even if her second spouse died. There is also an implied ordinance: a man who divorces a wife should write her a bill of divorce. Divorce itself is not a statute: it is neither forbidden nor required. In the New Testament passages, Jesus forbids divorce. He cannot be said here to be refusing to deal with the law as statute. In fact, it would seem that he introduces a statute where there was none: he forbids divorce.<sup>98</sup>

Everyone who has read his book will know that what Westerholm means when he says that Jesus does not deal with the law as statute is that Jesus does not consider obeying the law to be the same thing as carefully keeping within its statutory regulations.<sup>99</sup> Sanders complains that Westerholm is not clear about what he means by statutes but what could be clearer than this?

‘... a prerequisite for the development of the Pharisaic code was the understanding of O.T. law as statute, i.e. as made up of prescriptions whose very wording was binding for legal procedure.’<sup>100</sup>

One often comes across children or politicians in their arguments deliberately missing the point but it is unusual to find a reputable scholar doing it so flagrantly in a scholarly work. Sanders argues that it cannot be said that Jesus refused to deal with the law as statute since he introduced a statute on divorce himself by saying things like: ‘What God has joined let not man put asunder’ and ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her’. But of course this begs the question, for Westerholm’s whole argument is based on the understanding that in saying such things Jesus was *not* laying down statutes but rather indicating the spirit which lay behind them. Sanders must surely see this since he himself points out that when Jesus made such pronouncements not even his disciples obeyed them as rules:

I wish ... to call attention to a curious aspect... Even when we know or have good reason to believe that we have a saying which touches on the law and which goes back to Jesus, we can also tell that the saying did not entirely determine early Christian behaviour and attitude. The saying on divorce is secure and is attested to by Paul - who quotes it, attributes it to the Lord, and proceeds to give his own rules independently. The saying to let the dead bury the dead seems to have had no repercussion at all. It is unlike anything known from early Christianity, and this helps support its authenticity; but it also means that it was without influence. The

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<sup>98</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 256-7

<sup>99</sup> ‘Jesus does not interpret the wording of the O.T. text (Deut 24.1) as a statute adequately expressing the will of God, but derives the latter on the basis of other considerations. ... Jesus shows no further interest in defining the wording of the rules by which human society are governed, but turns immediately to the absolute will of God, which those preoccupied with defining statutory law may easily forget.’ Stephan Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Upsala: Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series) p. 122

<sup>100</sup> Westerholm, *Scribal Authority*, p. 21

Jesus of Matt. 15.4//Mark 7.10 and of Matt. 19.19 and parr. repeats the commandment to honour father and mother as if it is to be accepted without reservation.<sup>101</sup>

You would have thought that Sanders' realization that Jesus' hypothetical statutes on divorce and the burial of the dead had been cheerfully disregarded by his followers would have been enough to convince him that they were not statutes and that he had got it wrong. But clearly it wasn't, for Sanders continues to carefully avoid seeing what is so painfully obvious: *Jesus had a different way of understanding what obeying the law entailed*. Had Sanders admitted that this was the case, of course, he would have been obliged to review his whole argument because if Jesus was not concerned to make new statutes the chances are that he did not find the Mosaic dispensation inadequate, which means that he was not in the business of bringing in a 'new age' but rather with fulfilling Israel's task in the age he found himself within.<sup>102</sup>

So why does Jesus rule out divorce in his statement of the spirit underlying the Mosaic law? Quite simply, as I see it, because it would have been nonsensical for him to have put forward divorce as part of Yahweh's will for mankind. Since Yahweh offers one-flesh marriage as his extraordinary and wonderful gift to mankind he cannot at the same time offer divorce as a negation of it. That would make no sense. Does this mean that divorce can never, in any circumstances, be the best option for those whose marriages have broken down? Not necessarily, I would have thought, but that is something which can only be discovered by those who honestly try to work out in their lives what obedience to the spirit of Yahweh implies in their particular circumstances.<sup>103</sup>

### Sinners.

Both Sanders and Wright claim that Jesus was willing to offer sinners forgiveness on condition that they accepted him, regardless of whether they were repentant or had made restitution according to the requirements of the law. Believing this to be the case they are ready to declare that he called into question the whole adequacy of the law<sup>104</sup> i.e. that he displayed a sovereign attitude towards it. However, if this was so wouldn't you expect Jesus to have required from such sinners at least some act of confirmation *that they had indeed accepted him as a replacement for the Temple-cult*, exactly in the

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<sup>101</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 268

<sup>102</sup> '... we .. see here the view that the Mosaic dispensation is not adequate. The prohibition [on divorce] shows that Jesus expected there to be a better order.' Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 260

<sup>103</sup> Jesus thinks of adultery not legalistically as a sin in itself but rather as a dishonour done to the spouse. So if a marriage irretrievably breaks down and both spouses decide to divorce and then remarry what dishonour have they done to each other? There is therefore no adultery in my opinion. What happens to the children is another question.

<sup>104</sup> 'We should return to our proposal about Jesus' view of the inclusion of the 'tax collectors and sinners'. If what I earlier suggested is true - that he thought that accepting him would ensure them a place in the kingdom even if they did not repent and make restitution according to the normal requirements of the law - then he obviously called into question the adequacy of the law. This would not have been precisely *opposing* it, but rather acting on the premise that it need not be applied to those who followed him.' Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 255. 'He announced the forgiveness of sins, which as we saw indicated that he was in some sense bypassing the whole Temple Cult. If YHWH's return to Zion was to happen in and through him, he had the right and authority to reconstitute Israel around himself, as the forgiven, i.e. the returned-from-exile, people of the one true god.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 647



manner that the Church operates when it enrolls new members (sinners) in Jesus' name today? But of course there is no hint of such a requirement within the texts! So although it is perfectly true that these texts speak of Jesus as forgiving sinners it seems to me that we will have to forget the replacement business and think again.

In fact the important question is not whether Jesus saw himself as a replacement for the Temple-cult but whether in forgiving sinners he saw himself as sovereign over the law? Did Jesus pretend it was within *his* competence to forgive sins even though this was generally considered as something only God could do, or was it simply that he believed that the spirit of Yahweh, as manifest in the law, obliged him to pronounce the forgiveness of sins? Personally I think that anyone who believes that Jesus purposefully put himself above the law hasn't bothered to read the texts intelligently; either that or they are intent on avoiding what has clearly been put forward. I am convinced Jesus believed that *obeying the law required not just him, but everyone who wished to join in being the true Israel, to pronounce that sinners were forgiven*. But since the objectives of my book is to show this to be the case I prefer not to go any further into the matter at the moment.<sup>105</sup>

#### The Antitheses.

In dealing with the question whether Jesus behaved with a sovereign attitude to the law one naturally recalls the so-called antitheses; those sayings in which Jesus cites some traditional principle followed by his own alternative advice: 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say unto you ...'. Sanders points out that these antitheses have been used in the past both to argue that Jesus intentionally broke the law as well as to argue that he radicalised it rather than abrogated it. He considers the second possibility the more likely, claiming that these are in the main 'not only but also' sayings which both 'affirm the law' and 'press beyond it'. He concludes that 'if authentic they would be further indications that Jesus did not oppose the Mosaic code, but did find it to be inadequate.' Having said that he ends up discounting them in his argument because of doubts he has about their authenticity.<sup>106</sup>

The Jesus of this material approves of external 'minutiae', such as fasting and tithing, but objects to Pharisaic obviousness. His followers are to do the same things, but with a better appearance, not making a show (Matt. 6. i-8, i 6-i 8; 23.5f.). This Jesus, in short, requires super-strict observance of every particular of the law - and then some. He calls outsiders 'Gentiles and tax collectors' (*ethnikoi, ethnikos*: Matt. 5-47; 6.7; 18.17; 'tax collectors' used pejoratively: Matt. 5.46; 18.17). This, I think, is not the historical Jesus, who was a friend of tax collectors and sinners and who did not make entrance into the kingdom dependent on being better at Pharisaism than the Pharisees themselves.<sup>107</sup>

Wright takes a rather different line. First he has no doubts about these sayings' authenticity and so no hesitation in using them in his argument. Second he *appears* to advocate that the sayings do not indicate in any way that the Mosaic dispensation was inadequate:

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<sup>105</sup> My thesis is that the spirit of the Law is radical solidarity and forgiving sinners is simply radical solidarity expressed.

<sup>106</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 260

<sup>107</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 261

Jesus claims the high ground: it is his interpretation of the vocation and destiny of Israel that is in ultimate continuity with the Torah and the Prophets, and the scribes and Pharisees have got it wrong. The kingdom will not override Moses and the Prophets - how could it, without the covenant god contradicting himself? - but Israel must not remain content with the shallow reading of scripture that uses it merely to bolster her own national security. There is a deeper meaning in the sacred writings than first-century Israel had grasped; it is this deeper meaning that Jesus is commanding.

The deeper meaning is seen particularly in the series of five 'antitheses' between 'what was said to those of old time' and 'but I say unto you' (5.21- 48). ... The emphasis of this whole section is on a mode of Torah-intensification which is quite unlike that of the Pharisees. Instead of defining ever more closely the outward actions necessary for the keeping of Torah, thereby proving one's loyalty to YHWH's covenant, Israel was challenged to discover the meaning of the commands in terms of a totally integrated loyalty of heart and act. ... the real clash between Jesus and his opponents is one of *agenda*, not of petty legalistic quibbles.

In seeing the sayings as being about 'different interpretations'<sup>108</sup> of the law and the prophets Wright suggests that the Mosaic dispensation itself is not in question. What is being criticised is the Pharisaic *interpretation* of the Mosaic dispensation. This is qualified as legalistic, shallow and wrong as over against Jesus' interpretation which is both deep and correct. However, I only say that Wright *appears* not to see Jesus in these texts as relativising the Mosaic dispensation because I am well aware that his main argument is that Jesus did see himself as doing just that:

I completely agree with Sanders that Jesus 'challenged the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation' at various points, on the grounds that the day for a new dispensation was now dawning.<sup>109</sup>

What we have here are two scholars, who are both clearly advocates of the perfecting strategy, fundamentally differing about its particular relevance in certain texts. One argues that these texts would support the perfecting strategy if they could be taken as authentic, which unfortunately they can't, and the other argues that though they certainly can be taken as authentic the texts don't support the perfecting strategy! Though I do not follow Sanders all the way in his argument I agree that these texts offer an idiosyncratic portrait of Jesus. The idea that he advocated fasting and the strict observance of the letter of the law, as they do, cannot be historical. There is therefore, demonstrably, a falsifying editorial hand at work in these texts which makes it difficult to trust the evidence elsewhere. On the other hand Wright's verdict that the texts support the idea that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the law (as opposed to perfecting it as with Sanders) is certainly correct. Wright's mistake is in wanting to use the turn of the ages idea so that he can have the privilege of using both strategies without ever having the obligation of defining a cross-over moment (the having one's cake and eating it syndrome).

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<sup>108</sup> As in other places in Wright's work: '[The kingdom announcement] constituted a challenge to Jesus' contemporaries: give up the interpretation of your tradition which has so gripped you, which is driving you towards the cliff-edge of ruin. Embrace instead a different interpretation of your tradition, one which, though it looks like the way of loss, is in fact the way to true victory.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 383. 'Israel's hope was conceived in relation to land, family, Torah and Temple; Jesus subverted the common interpretation of these, and offered his own fresh and positive alternative.' p. 428. etc.

<sup>109</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 382.

### Jesus' self-claim and call to discipleship

Finally it is argued by some scholars that Jesus displayed sovereignty over the law in his self-claim, expressing this in his call to others to discipleship, the understanding being that he was implicitly asking people to follow *him* rather than *Torah*. Thus Sanders, in dealing with text about the man who wished to bury his father before joining him, writes:

At least once Jesus was willing to say that following him superseded the requirements of piety and the Torah. This may show that Jesus was prepared, if necessary, to challenge the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation.<sup>110</sup>

### Likewise Wright:

Jesus was following, and advocating, an agenda which involved setting aside some of the most central and cherished symbols of the Judaism of his day, and replacing them with loyalty to himself. More specifically, his attitude to Torah (during his Galilean work) pointed towards his action in the Temple.<sup>111</sup>

It is, of course, beyond all reasonable doubt that Jesus called people to follow him and I am happy to go along with the argument that this was indeed a Messianic act recalling the prophecies of Yahweh returning to reign in Zion. But I would point out that there is nothing in such prophecies to indicate that such a return would usher in a 'new age' in which the Mosaic dispensation would be relativised and replaced. Without offering any justifying argument whatsoever both Sanders and Wright simply presuppose that the eschatological aspect of this return to Zion (and the parallel arrival in Jesus' ministry of the Kingdom of God) indicates the arrival of a new dispensation:

We must begin where Sanders ends: with eschatology. The main issue between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries was his claim that the moment had come, that their god was even now inaugurating his kingdom, and that *this* - this praxis, these stories, this person - *was the mode and means of its inauguration*. Thus far, Sanders; and in my view rightly.<sup>112</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that [Jesus] should also speak as though he were the new lawgiver: not just the new Moses, bringing a new Torah from Mount Sinai, but one who gave new instructions on his own authority. This, once more, had nothing to do with a claim that the Torah itself was bad, shoddy, or unworthy. It was an eschatological claim: the moment had arrived for the great renewal, in which Torah would be written on people's hearts. This new dispensation would mean that certain commands would become redundant, like candies in the

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<sup>110</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 255. See also p. 319: 'Jesus saw himself as God's last messenger before the establishment of the kingdom. He looked for a new order, created by a mighty act of God. In the new order the twelve tribes would be reassembled, there would be a new temple, force of arms would not be needed, divorce would be neither necessary nor permitted, outcasts - even the wicked - would have a place, and Jesus and his disciples - the poor, meek and lowly - would have the leading role.'

<sup>111</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 548. See also p. 381 '... what does loyalty to Israel's god mean for a Palestinian Jew faced with the announcement that the long-awaited kingdom is now at last appearing? Jesus' zealous contemporaries would have said: Torah provides the litmus test of loyalty to Israel's god and to his covenant. Jesus said: what counts is following me.' Or p. 652: 'The difference between the beliefs of Jesus and those of thousands of other Jews of his day amounted simply to this: he believed, also, that all these things were coming true in and through himself. His particular task to offer a symbolic encoding (or decoding?) of this entire theology and expectation in terms of his own life and work.' Or p. 646: 'Loyalty to Israel's god, astonishingly, would now take the form of loyalty to Jesus; to get rid of ancestral land would be the equivalent of throwing away pagan idols. Just as Jesus acted as if he thought he were the reality to which the Temple pointed, or even the one who had authority over the Temple, so he acted and spoke as if he were in some sense the replacement for Torah, or even the one who had authority over Torah itself.'

<sup>112</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 383.

sunrise; but who would have the authority to declare that this moment had arrived for the holy, god-given Torah? Jesus, apparently; as two leading writers on Jesus and Judaism have declared, Jesus did in this sense 'claim to speak for God', declaring that the Mosaic dispensation was, at the very least, no longer adequate, that a new moment had dawned in which some of its god-given provisions were to be set aside.<sup>113</sup>

But this is not justified at all. *There is nothing in the idea of Yahweh's return to Zion, or for that matter the coming of the kingdom, which indicates a 'new age' and a relativising of the Mosaic dispensation.* So it remains to be shown that Jesus was asking people to replace their loyalty to Torah by loyalty to himself. It could equally be the case that he was doing nothing of the kind; that he was simply asking people to join him in fulfilling the Mosaic dispensation by finally performing as the light to lighten the Gentiles ... as the true Israel. That is the argument of the alternative fulfilling strategy to which we must now turn.

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<sup>113</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 646.

## Chapter 3.

### Jesus Fulfiller of the Mosaic Dispensation?

In the last chapter we dealt with the *perfecting strategy*: the hypothesis that Jesus operated with a proactive and ‘new dispensation’ understanding; seeing God as introducing through him alone a higher standard of human behaviour and thus rendering the old Mosaic Law inadequate. We found none of the arguments put forward to justify this hypothesis compelling and so we must now look to the alternative hypothesis: the *fulfilment strategy*. Here the understanding is that Jesus operated with a reactive, ‘old dispensation’ understanding; seeing the old Mosaic standard as fulfilled by those Israelites who joined with him in effectively performing as Yahweh’s light.

#### *The Fulfilment Strategy and Discipline*

##### *1. Jesus’ strategy as reactive*

What precisely is meant by the words *proactive* and *reactive* here?

In a proactive strategy an authoritative ‘truth’<sup>114</sup> is proclaimed or advocated.

In a reactive strategy human behaviour is highlighted and then measured against an authoritative ‘truth’, which is well established and already accepted by all parties.

Since we are dealing here with ideologically charged material (material strongly coloured by a given political idea or conviction) this means that whereas in a proactive strategy ideology is to the fore, in a reactive strategy ideology is assumed and the question is one of discipline i.e.: facing up to inappropriate behaviour or attitudes and their consequences. In the perfecting hypothesis Jesus is seen as operating proactively: as preaching or teaching a new standard or ‘truth’. In the fulfilling hypothesis Jesus is seen as operating reactively: as illuminating the old standard or ‘truth’ by unmistakably achieving it in his own life, thereby drawing attention to other people’s failure to do so.

#### Problems with vocabulary

It is exceedingly important to grasp this distinction since it is easy to become confused and misread situations. One reason for this is that, most unfortunately, we tend to use *the same vocabulary* when talking about proactive and reactive strategies. I try to get into the habit of using words like ‘preach’ and ‘teach’ *only* to describe *proactive* performances. However, I cannot deny that these words can be used of people working illuminatively with illustrations. Likewise I try to use words like ‘disclose’, and ‘reveal’ *only* to describe *reactive* performances but I cannot deny that these words can be used of people proclaiming or advocating authoritative ‘truths’. As if this weren’t

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<sup>114</sup> I put the word in italics because though it is advocated as the truth it may in fact not be so!

enough, further confusion is brought about by the fact that, like everyone else, Jesus was in the habit of operating at some times proactively and at others reactively. So when using this distinction you always have to bear in mind that the reference is specifically to Jesus' underlying, basic or core strategy and not to the tactics he may have employed in specific circumstances. The problem with all of this confusion is that it plays into the hands of those who wish to present Jesus' fundamental activity in a proactive light. In our society people are naturally biased in favour of proactive behaviour, which to them appears powerful and robust, and against reactive behaviour which they take as being weak and soft. This being the case it doesn't take much to convince people, even against the textual evidence, that Jesus operated with a proactive strategy.

## 2. *Jesus' strategy as fulfilment.*

The fulfilment hypothesis stands or falls by whether it can persuasively be demonstrated that Jesus operated, as he and his followers saw it, *entirely within the old, Mosaic dispensation*, consciously performing the job Yahweh had given Israel to do. In this regard the word 'fulfilment' itself becomes part of the issue since it figures extensively in the texts though not always as the self-same Greek word.<sup>115</sup> It is necessary therefore to ascertain what exactly was meant by it. As it stands within our title for the alternative strategy<sup>116</sup> it means simply performing Israel's job as the chosen people as this is envisaged in the Mosaic covenant, given our understanding that such a thing can be determined. But is that a fair rendering of its meaning in the Gospels?

In their overall description of Jesus' basic strategy both Sanders and Wright take the fulfilment idea on board:

[Jesus] surely thought of himself as fulfilling God's plan and thus, in a sense, the law and the prophets.<sup>117</sup>

[Jesus] was claiming, as we have seen all along, to be announcing that the central aspirations of the Jewish people were coming to pass, though not in the way they had expected. He was proposing fulfilment, not mere novelty.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore both admit that it constitutes *an old dispensation term*:

Thus [Mat] 5.48 ('be perfect') and [Mat] 5.17 (I came to fulfil the law) in their present context mean 'be perfectly observant of the higher as well as of the lower law'; ...<sup>119</sup>

Jesus claims the high ground: it is his interpretation of the vocation and destiny of Israel that is in ultimate continuity with the Torah and the Prophets, and the scribes and Pharisees have got it wrong. The kingdom will not override Moses and the Prophets - how could it, without the covenant god contradicting himself - but Israel must not remain content with the shallow reading of scripture that uses it merely to bolster her own national security. There is a deeper meaning in the sacred writings

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<sup>115</sup> Especially Mat 5.17, but also 5.18, 24.34, Lk 22.16, as well as the evangelists' many statements about the fulfilment of scripture in Jesus' work: Mat 1.22, 2.15, 17, 23, 8.17, 12.17, 13.35, 21.4, Jn 12.38, 15.25, 17.12, 18.9, 32, 19.24, 28, 36; Lk 21.22, 24, [24.44].

<sup>116</sup> See Chapter heading.

<sup>117</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 262

<sup>118</sup> Wright, *Victory*, 375-6

<sup>119</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 261. By 'the lower' Sanders means the Mosaic law, 'the higher' being that pronounced by Jesus.

than first-century Israel had grasped; it is this deeper meaning that Jesus is commending.<sup>120</sup>

However, notice the intriguing caveats they introduce into their statements. Sanders writes that Jesus surely thought of himself as fulfilling the law and the prophets *in a sense*, while Wright states that Jesus was proposing fulfilment, not *mere* novelty. The reason for slipping these in is of course that they both want to go on afterwards and add more – much more in fact. For both want to make it quite clear that Jesus was not just fulfilling the law but also perfecting it:

Jesus himself looked to a new age, and therefore he viewed the institutions of this age as not final, and in that sense not adequate.<sup>121</sup>

‘... when the promises of scripture were fulfilled, then the heart itself would be changed, and the supreme position of Torah would in consequence be relativized.’<sup>122</sup>

It is possible to identify such unjustified and unacknowledged switches from old-dispensation ‘fulfilment’ talk to new-dispensation ‘perfecting and relativizing’ talk in the works of many twentieth century scholars since they believe it is necessary to avoid viewing Jesus either as the bringer of a completely new religion or as simply the justifier of the old one. Here I offer just one example from Ben F. Meyer:

The teaching of Jesus ... had no other point than to realize the Torah's inmost spirit of self-forgetfulness in its full purity, fierce and flawless. In all their concrete radicalness and definiteness his commands simply gave eschatological body to this inner dynamism and spirit. They could not have been predicted or deduced from the Torah, but they presented themselves as its supreme form.<sup>123</sup>

Had Jesus been simply fulfilling the law and the prophets his teachings (and indeed his entire performance) could most certainly have been ideologically ‘predicted’ or ‘deduced’ from the Torah.<sup>124</sup> That, after all, is what fulfilment implies. Indeed the whole object of the fulfilment strategy is to behave in a way which people in their hearts know full well to be right even if kills them to have to admit it. This is what the reader expects Meyer to conclude when he starts off by saying that ‘The teaching of Jesus had no other point than to realize the Torah’s inmost spirit’. But of course his conclusion is the exact opposite – that Jesus’ commands could *not* have been predicted or deduced from Torah. This way he destroys the fulfilment strategy. If you look carefully at his statement you will notice that he manages to pull the trick off only by introducing eschatology. Like vulgar magicians who cover their sleight of hand in puffs of smoke, modern scholars often cover their illicit moves in puffs of eschatology!

But how can I be so certain that this crossover – this assertion that Jesus both fulfilled the law and outstripped it – is unjustifiable? Well, I have already pointed out that it defies reason – unless you happen to introduce the notion of a specific moment when a change of strategy took place – which, of course, no one does. And I have also shown that the crossover relies on reading eschatological features within the texts as

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<sup>120</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 289

<sup>121</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 269

<sup>122</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 380. See also: ‘the time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. *Victory*, p. 433-4.

<sup>123</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, London: SCM press, 1979. p. 146

<sup>124</sup> They could not, of course, have been predicted in detail since that would have excluded individuality.

indications of a new age, which they demonstrably are not, and indeed cannot be since a new age is a cosmological event whereas eschatological features are transcendent or what I would prefer to call *metacosmic*.<sup>125</sup> And I have also drawn attention to the fact that any new-age features which do exist within the texts will almost certainly be the result of the church looking back rather than Jesus looking forward since all new age talk is experiential not anticipatory. To these already decisive points I now add the fact that these scholarly, crossover constructions prove themselves to be fictions by the way in which they demonstrably falsify the historical record and destroy the fulfilment strategy which they pretend to advocate.

What I am implying here is that all of this talk about Jesus' fulfilling the law, in current scholarly works, is simply flannel. Its sole purpose is to make the point that these writers are determined not to be seen as advocates of the now discredited view that Jesus was introducing a new religion. In other words these scholars have no intention whatsoever of taking this idea of fulfilment seriously in itself. How can I say this? Quite simply because taking the idea of fulfilment seriously means much more than seeing it negatively – as a statement that Jesus was *not* introducing a new religion. Positively, fulfilment means seeing Jesus as the light to lighten the Gentiles; i.e. as the one who both demonstrated what was entailed in performing as Yahweh's true servant and also exposed what was not. In short, taking fulfilment seriously means portraying Jesus as the great expositor and unmasker of first century Palestinian society, and this is precisely what none of these scholars are prepared to do, even though the Gospel texts are brimming over with evidence of it. As I have already said in my previous book *Light Denied: A Challenge to Historians* I examined the works of thirty eminent twentieth century biblical historians (involving over fifty books in all) and I was unable to find a single trace of Jesus as the demonstrator and expositor.

But even if it is true that, for some unexplained reason, twentieth century historians did fail to take the positive aspects of fulfilment seriously why should this of itself indicate that Jesus could not have fulfilled the law *as well as outstripping it*, as all of these scholars maintain? Quite simply because you cannot advocate a serious fulfilment strategy as well as a serious outstripping strategy for Jesus without undermining his unity as a person and turning him into a schizophrenic. It's as simple as that and scholars know it. *That is why they deal with the fulfilment strategy only as a negative*, passing over in silence its positive aspects. So even their own work offers conclusive proof for my thesis that what we are dealing with here is an either/or situation, whether people like it or not.

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<sup>125</sup> I will later argue that metacosmic and transcendent mean quite different things (See p. 242 below). Here I am simply acknowledging that many use the word transcendent to mean what I mean by metacosmic. I use 'meta' to signify 'behind' or 'beyond', and 'cosmic' for the world or universe. Interestingly the word μετακοσμησις was used by Plato and Plutarch to mean 'a new arrangement' or 'a conversion' and this same word was used during the last century by a group of Anglo-Catholics to signify the process at the heart of the Incarnation and the Eucharist ( See F.H. Smyth, *Discerning the Lord's Body*) but this is a completely unconnected matter.



### 3. *Jesus' strategy as performing as Yahweh's light*

In the fulfilment strategy the operation of light is understood in a very precise way: as a power which illuminates and in so doing exposes the true character of that upon which it shines, thus making knowledge, understanding and judgement possible. As far as we know Deutero-Isaiah was the first to use the phenomenon of light in this way, to characterize the task which Yahweh wanted Israel as his chosen servant to perform in order to bring the world to its senses:

"I am the LORD,  
I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness."<sup>126</sup>

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."<sup>127</sup>

#### Lamp-light and sun-light

In point of fact there are *two different ways* in which the phenomenon of light is used in the Old Testament. It is sometimes used to indicate a source of illumination and hence of knowledge and justice as above,<sup>128</sup> and in such contexts the light source is usually conceived of as a lamp. But it is also used at times to indicate a power for salvation which chases away fear and brings in the good time, and in such contexts the light source is usually conceived of as the dawning sun. Interestingly, the light phenomenon is used in Isaiah in *both* ways. On the one hand, as I have already pointed out, the illuminating phenomenon of light is used to represent *Israel's* task within the covenant agreement: to perform as the light to enlighten the Gentiles. On the other hand the alternative, salvific function of light is used to represent *Yahweh's* covenant obligation: to afford Israel *protection* from her enemies thereby *justifying* her illuminating and exposing performance.

Though these two characteristics of the light phenomenon are quite distinct and though third Isaiah uses them to characterize the performance of quite distinct personalities (Israel and Yahweh) he nonetheless sees them as coming together to form a unity. He prophesies about a moment in the future when God will forgive and restore Israel *so that she may at last perform her exposing task and he justify it with his salvation:*

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold darkness shall cover the earth,  
And thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you,  
And nations shall come to your light,

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<sup>126</sup> Is 42.6-7.

<sup>127</sup> Is 49.6.

<sup>128</sup> Ps 119, 105, 130; Prov 4.18, 6.23; Is 5.20, 30, 51.4, 59.9, 60.19-20; Dan 2.22, 5.11; Hos 6.5.

And kings to the brightness of your rising.<sup>129</sup>

The two-in-one mistaken for a beacon

However, in this unity the operations of these distinct phenomena (Israel's exposing light and Yahweh's saving light) naturally become a bit confused, making it easy to misunderstand what the book of Isaiah is proposing. We moderns almost instinctively read the last two lines of this amazing text as indicating that at this future moment of restoration *Israel will perform as a beacon drawing the nations to her with a mesmeric attraction*. This is because we are heavily influenced by our experience of the phenomenon of light in the modern world as *a beacon which attracts attention and shows the way*. But in point of fact *light is never understood in this way in the Bible* and this text is no exception. So if Isaiah claims that at the moment of her restoration the nations will come to Israel's exposing light it is not because he believes that they will find such exposing ways attractive (indeed he knows from bitter experience they won't) but because they will find Yahweh justifying them – or, to put the same thing in non-religious language, because they will discover that life itself vindicates this exposing behaviour in some quite unforeseen way. In short the nations will make this pilgrimage because an entirely unexpected eschatological event in connection with Israel's exposing performance will effectively soften their hardness of heart.

All the evangelists take up Isaiah's light model to describe Jesus' work. Mark does it by means of the parable of the lamp which he interprets as a reference by Jesus to his own work:

And [Jesus] said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light."<sup>130</sup>

Matthew, for his part, in choosing to quote from First rather than Second Isaiah only uses the salvific half of the model in connection with Jesus:

... leaving Nazareth [Jesus] went and dwelt in Caper'naum by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-  
the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned."<sup>131</sup>

He uses the other, the exposing half of the model, only in connection with the disciples:

You are the light of the world ... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.<sup>132</sup>

Luke uses the whole model in his account of Simeon's blessing over the child Jesus:

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<sup>129</sup> Is 60.1-3

<sup>130</sup> Mk 4.21-22

<sup>131</sup> Mt 4.15 = Is 9.1-2

<sup>132</sup> Mt 5.14-16

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."<sup>133</sup>

John, for his part, uses both halves of the model extensively to produce the great light theme which dominates his whole Gospel:

And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.<sup>134</sup>

One thing about this biblical light business is clear: *it is an old-dispensation model*. It is used solely to describe the Mosaic covenant between Yahweh and his people and its future outworking, given Israel's failure to keep it and her consequent punishment. This means that there is nothing within it (or within the Isaianic prophecy as a whole for that matter) to indicate that there will come a time when the Mosaic dispensation will become outmoded. *The many evident eschatological passages associated with this Isaianic model notwithstanding, this new act of Yahweh in restoring his people is not envisaged as undermining in any way, shape or form the contract which he established with them in the first place.*

Sanders entirely passes over the light model in his work.<sup>135</sup> Not so Wright who certainly sees it, at least in the first instance, as an old-dispensation model in which Israel's election is affirmed:

Jesus was offering a different way of liberation, a way which affirmed the humanness of the national enemy *as well as* the destiny of Israel, and hence also affirmed the destiny of Israel as the bringer of light to the world, not as the one who would crush the world with military zeal.<sup>136</sup>

Here we see Wright operating in his 'alternative interpretation' mode, where he gives no inkling that he sees Jesus as demonstrating any inadequacy in the Mosaic dispensation. But, of course, Wright's final intention *is* to take the matter further, as can be seen in the sudden switch which occurs at the end of this quotation (which I have indicated by writing it in italics):

The kingdom of the one true god was at last coming into being, and it would be characterized not by defensiveness, but by Israel's being the light of the world; not by the angry zeal which would pay the Gentiles back in their own coin (as Mattathias had advised his son), but by turning the other cheek and going the second mile. The command to love one's enemies, and the prohibition on violent revolution, constituted not an attack on Torah as such but a radically different interpretation of Israel's ancestral tradition from those currently on offer. Jesus, precisely in affirming Israel's unique vocation to be the light of the world, was insisting that, now that the moment for fulfilment had come, *it was time to relativize those god-given markers of Israel's distinctiveness.*<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Lk 2.29-32

<sup>134</sup> Jn 3.19-21. See also 1.4-5, 1.7-9, 7.7, 8.12, 9.4-5, (9.39), 11.9-10, 12.35-6, 46.

<sup>135</sup> He is by no means alone in this e.g. Crossan.

<sup>136</sup> Wright *Victory*, p. 450. See also p 652: 'He believed that Israel was the true people of the one creator God, called to be the light of the world, called to accomplish her vocation through suffering. He cherished this belief in Israel's special vocation, even as he challenged current interpretations of it.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 389

What is interesting about this last sentence is that though it starts off by using the light theme apparently to affirm Torah (Jesus affirms Israel's vocation to be the light) it ends, for all that, by relativizing it. This 'argument' – apparently justifying the idea that Jesus relativized Torah – is made by ignoring the logic of 'light bearing' and concentrating instead on the logic of 'uniqueness', thus: since Israel alone was given the job of being the light to the world, now that this job was being done (by Jesus himself and those Israelites who would go along with him) it was no longer appropriate to insist on Israel's uniqueness.

It is true, of course, that in so far as the Israelites saw themselves as ideologically motivated by a specific political idea not shared by other communities in the ancient world, they saw themselves as quite different:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.<sup>138</sup>

However, it is dangerous for Wright to speak of this difference in terms of uniqueness, which suggests that Yahweh chose Israel *only* and that his choice was due to Israel being somehow special in herself. Later texts in the Old Testament certainly speak of Yahweh choosing Israel<sup>139</sup> but not of his choosing Israel *only*.<sup>140</sup> What is more they speak of this choice as dictated by a negative characteristic (Israel's lack of coercive strength<sup>141</sup>) and insist that any difference marking out Israel from the other nations was due to ideological performance alone ('if you will obey my voice'). But this is not all. If Jesus does fulfil Israel's vocation to be the light of the world, as Wright maintains, then this clearly constitutes a performance which can only be verified and confirmed by recognising that it measures up to the ideological spirit revealed in Torah. This being the case it is nonsense to speak of Torah becoming relativized as far as Jesus is concerned.<sup>142</sup>

#### 4. *Jesus strategy as historical not eschatological*

I have already shown that some scholars use the notion of eschatology to make it appear feasible for Jesus to perform within both dispensations by means of the perfecting strategy alone. I now want to go further and point out that eschatology is also used by Sanders and others<sup>143</sup> as a way of putting forward strategies which simply don't add up when judged in the material realm in which we all operate. This is done by hiding one end of the strategy within the eschatological: by suggesting that certain human actions, though manifestly suicidal in the normal course of events, would so

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<sup>138</sup> Ex 19.5-6. See also Deut 26.18-19.

<sup>139</sup> I will later argue that this language of election tended to lead to revisionism; see Chapter 15, p 319 below.

<sup>140</sup> It may be argued that Amos 3.2 gets close to doing so but the prophets objective was not to exalt Israel but rather to play off her pretentiousness against herself.

<sup>141</sup> Num 23.9, Deut 4.38, 9.1, 26.7-9

<sup>142</sup> Of course it may be argued that Jesus' performance is eschatological in that it comes to us direct and has no need to be measured against anything. If that is the case then the fulfilment idea has been abandoned altogether and we are into a Marcionite, new-religion scenario which most scholars are, for good reason, anxious to avoid.

<sup>143</sup> e.g. Fredrikson, Paula *What You See is What You Get. Theology Today* Vol 52. No 1. April 1995.

please God as to elicit a positive, *force majeure* response from him, thereby guaranteeing success even against the material odds.

Was Jesus a Crank?

We are all aware of people who advocate such half-baked, eschatological strategies. We call them cranks or fanatics. However, Sanders seeks to convince us that first century Palestine was unusually full of them and indeed that Jesus was one of their number:

In general, as the years went on, people thought that God would do more in connection with the new age: their expectations became more grandiose and more supernatural. In the classical period of Israelite prophecy (the eighth to the fifth centuries BCE), prophets thought that, for the most part, God worked in history by using human rulers and armies. This idea did not entirely vanish, but many Jews began looking back to more dramatic times as the model of how God would act in the future. God had once parted the sea, had produced manna in the wilderness, had caused the sun to stand still, had brought down the walls of Jericho. In the future he would do such great deeds and even greater. In the decades after Jesus, Theudas thought that God would part the water of the Jordan river, and the Egyptian expected him to cause the walls of Jerusalem to fall down. One of the authors of *I Enoch*, ... expected God to bring down a new and greater Temple, and the author of the *Temple Scroll* had the same hope. ... the author of the *Qumran War Scroll* expected angels, led by Michael, to fight on behalf of the Jewish armies, but the final blows to be struck by God himself. The author of *Psalms of Solomon* expected the Davidic Messiah neither to 'rely on horse and rider and bow', nor to 'collect gold and silver for war', nor to 'build up hope in a multitude for a day of war'; he would, instead, rely on God (*Psalms of Solomon* 17.3 3f).

This is what I mean by saying that Jesus was a 'radical eschatologist'. He expected God to act in a decisive way, so as to change things fundamentally.<sup>144</sup>

Given that in the real nature of things such eschatological strategies come unstuck it is not surprising that Sanders ends up imagining that Jesus died disappointed:

It is possible that, when Jesus drank his last cup of wine and predicted that he would drink it again in the kingdom, he thought that the kingdom would arrive immediately. After he had been on the cross for a few hours, he despaired, and cried out that he had been forsaken... he may have died disappointed<sup>145</sup>

I have to say that I find the suggestion that first century Palestinians were afflicted by such a cranky attitude to life extremely patronizing. Sanders says that the notion, found in Jewish apocalyptic, that people should put their confidence in Yahweh rather than in military strength, is something new and at variance with the ideas of the classical prophets. He argues that it demonstrates a move in the intertestamental period to a 'grandiose and supernatural' strategy within Israel which echoes the more ancient exodus and conquest period of Israel's history. But, of course, nothing could be further from the truth since even a cursory examination of the prophetic works shows that they too were continually advocating the self-same strategy. Rather than explaining it away

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<sup>144</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, p. 261-2.

<sup>145</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, p. 274-5. See also his comments on God's personal destruction of the temple: 'If Jesus threatened the Temple, or predicted its destruction ... he did not think that he and his small band could knock down the walls, so that not one stone was left on another. He thought that God would destroy it. As a good Jewish prophet, he could have thought that God would employ a foreign army for this destruction; but, as a radical first-century eschatologist, he probably thought that God would do it directly. Sanders, *Figure*, p. 259

as an eschatological madness which Jesus shared, Sanders and co. would do better to try and understand the material foundations of this strategy of ‘confidence in Yahweh’, god of the marginals.<sup>146</sup>

When it comes to such things as people’s basic strategies it is highly unlikely that one generation will behave in a fundamentally different way from another, unless of course some cataclysmic event occurs to shatter its confidence.<sup>147</sup> That said, the way in which different generations express such a strategy may well vary. This being the case it is unsafe to make too much of changes in forms of expression such as the advent of Jewish apocalyptic. Josephus started out his career as a Jewish revolutionary operating against the Romans. However, his contacts with the enemy convinced him, rightly as it turned out, that the nation would prove no match for this rising superpower. He therefore changed tack and started speaking out *against* resistance. That said, he still expressed his new message in the customary apocalyptic terms: arguing that the predicted Jewish world ruler in the book of Daniel was in fact Vespasian, who had first been acclaimed emperor in Judea.<sup>148</sup> Wright suggests that in arguing thus he probably had his tongue in his cheek<sup>149</sup> but that surely is the point. It shows that the development of the apocalyptic form in the intertestamental period (or whenever it took place) should not be seen as a sign that people had abandoned the habit of working out their strategies in the normal way by carefully weighing advantages (just as Josephus did) or that they had opted for a crazy eschatological strategy as per Sanders.

Did Jesus find himself running out of time?

To do him justice Wright’s version of the perfecting strategy is not based on eschatology. It is interesting, however, to note that he gets it indirectly from the same source as Sanders gets his: Albert Schweitzer.<sup>150</sup> Schweitzer drew attention to Jesus’ curious prediction in Mat 10.23 that the disciples whom he had sent out on a missionary expedition would not have time to complete their journey throughout all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man came.<sup>151</sup> Commenting on this text, which he reads in conjunction with the harvest parables, Schweitzer writes that ‘Jesus must have expected the coming of the Kingdom at harvest time’ and that ‘it is for that reason that he sends out his disciples to make known in Israel what is about to happen as speedily as may be.’

He tells [the disciples] in plain words (Matt. 10.23) that he does not expect to see them back in the present age. The Parousia of the Son of Man, which is logically and temporally identical with the dawn of the Kingdom, will take place before they shall have completed a hasty journey through the cities of Israel to announce it. ... This is the form in which Jesus reveals to them the

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<sup>146</sup> See below pp. 135-137; 140-151 and Chapter 14 pp. 319-352.

<sup>147</sup> The generation of Jews after the Jewish wars understandably had a rather different outlook to those preceding it.

<sup>148</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 324 see also pp. 64-5.

<sup>149</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 501

<sup>150</sup> Like Sanders Schweitzer sees Jesus as a radical eschatologist whose predictions fail to materialise.

<sup>151</sup> ‘What is the meaning of the saying in Matt. 10.23 about the imminent coming of the Son of Man, seeing that the disciples after all returned to Jesus without its being fulfilled?’ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: A. and C. Black, 1954 [1906]) p. 334.

secret of the Kingdom of God. A few days later, He utters the saying about the violent who, since the days of John the Baptist, are forcing on the coming of the Kingdom.<sup>152</sup>

Though G.B. Caird has no time for Schweitzer's bizarre eschatological understanding of Jesus' strategy,<sup>153</sup> not a thousand miles removed from that of Sanders,<sup>154</sup> he does pick up Schweitzer's notion that the Gospels seem to indicate that Jesus was working against the clock.<sup>155</sup> Why was this so, he asks?

In the middle of his ministry Jesus sent his disciples out on a missionary tour. The instructions he gave them have come down to us in several forms, drawn from at least four strands of tradition; and in details they differ. But in one essential respect they all agree. The mission was to be conducted with the utmost urgency. The missionaries were to travel light and travel fast. They were to greet nobody on the road; not that Jesus set a premium on bad manners, but because the endless civilities of oriental etiquette would consume more time than they could afford. They were to eat whatever was put before them, without pausing to enquire, as a good Pharisee would have done, whether their host had conformed with all the levitical food laws, which even Peter had observed from his youth. They were not to waste time in any place that was slow to give them a hearing. Why the desperate hurry? ... The .. probable answer is that Jesus was working against time to prevent the end of Israel's world, that the haste of the mission was directly connected with the many sayings which predict the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. He believed that Israel was at the cross-roads, that she must choose between two conceptions of her national destiny, and that the time for choice was terrifyingly short.<sup>156</sup>

It is this strategy, where Jesus is seen as bringing in the kingdom (i.e. Israel's full restoration<sup>157</sup>) in a hurry against a backdrop of rampant Jewish nationalism dead set on a disastrous rebellion against the empire, that Wright presents:

I therefore propose that the clash between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, especially the Pharisees, must be seen in terms of *alternative political agendas* generated by *alternative eschatological beliefs and expectations*. Jesus was announcing the kingdom in a way which did not reinforce but rather called into question, the agenda of revolutionary zeal which dominated the horizon of, especially, the dominant group within Pharisaism.<sup>158</sup>

I find this whole development falsely based. There is, as I see it, no indication in the Gospels that Jesus was working under *any* outside constraint, let alone against the clock. On the contrary, they portray him as being remarkably cool. It is other people, including presumably his disciples, who show the pressure.<sup>159</sup> Caird is shooting a line when he suggests that all four strands of the tradition agree that the mission of the

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<sup>152</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, p. 356-7

<sup>153</sup> 'It should be observed that Jesus in these parables, as well as in the related saying at the sending forth of the Twelve, uses the formula, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear", thereby signifying that in this utterance there lies concealed a supernatural knowledge concerning the plans of God, which only those who have ears to hear - that is, the foreordained - can detect. For others these sayings are unintelligible.' Schweitzer, *The Quest*, p. 356

<sup>154</sup> 'I see myself as standing on the shoulders of Schweitzer and Caird in particular ...' Sanders, *Victory*, n. 203, p. 594

<sup>155</sup> I am not altogether certain that Caird reads Schweitzer correctly here.

<sup>156</sup> Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone Press, 1965) p. 7-8

<sup>157</sup> '... anyone who was heard talking about the reign of Israel's god would be assumed to be referring to the fulfilment of Israel's long-held hope. The covenant god would act to reconstitute his people, to end their exile, to forgive their sins. When that happened, Israel would no longer be dominated by the pagans. She would be free. The means of liberation were no doubt open to debate. The goal was not.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 151

<sup>158</sup> Wright, *Victory*, p. 390

<sup>159</sup> Mk 10.34; Lk 13.31-33; 13.1-5.

disciples was to be conducted with the utmost urgency. *The truth is rather that there is no hint of urgency in any of them.* Certainly the missionaries were to travel light and to focus on the job in hand but it is absurd to suggest that the instruction to salute no one on the road<sup>160</sup> was given to avoid the endless civilities which would have consumed more time than could be afforded; or that the instruction to eat and drink what was provided<sup>161</sup> indicated that the disciples should not waste time inquiring of their hosts whether the offered food conformed with the levitical laws. Indeed, nowhere is there the slightest trace of this desperate hurry which Caird makes so much of.

The urgency as created by Jesus

That said, there certainly *is* an urgency displayed within the Gospels, *but it is entirely induced by Jesus himself.* It was not the case that he was under pressure to bring in the kingdom lest the nationalists provoke a denouement with Rome before he should have had time to develop his alternative strategy. It was rather *he who was putting others under pressure because of the completely different denouement he was driving towards.* There is in the Gospels no sword of Damocles hanging over Jesus' head since he is depicted as the one controlling events. The Caird-Wright strategy is thus untenable, first because it has no biblical basis and second because it envisages the pressure as coming from the wrong quarter.

In contrast, the fulfilment thesis offers a strategy which is 100% biblical and 100% historical (meaning non-eschatological). It envisages Jesus as carrying out to the letter Israel's task to be Yahweh's light by demonstrating it in his life. It sees this as exposing the hypocrisy of those who were only *pretending* to live in accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic law. I insist that this strategy is 100% historical because everything about it can be ascertained by appropriate historical methods. Jesus' life was such that his performance could always be measured against the standard set by the spirit of Yahweh as this was encapsulated, perfectly adequately, in the Torah. Consequently when it ended anyone and everyone 'in the know' could pronounce whether, in their judgement, he had or had not done what he had set out to do *without matters of belief in any shape or form entering into consideration.* This means that within the terms of the fulfilment strategy it is no longer possible for historians to avoid making a judgement by whingeing on that it is not within their remit. What is more, like everyone else, they themselves will be judged by the judgement that they make for that is the peculiar nature of this material: *you pronounce upon it at your own peril.*

Some, of course, will protest about the difficulty of making such a judgement, given the problem of extracting this so-called spirit of Yahweh from the Torah. The fact is of course that neither Jesus nor Paul gave the slightest indication that they for their part considered the Torah as inadequate in this respect. They accepted no excuse from people on the count that the Torah gave a less than perfectly satisfactory picture of what was expected of them and I think that most people would concur with this judgement whether they count themselves as Jews, Christians or atheists. The trouble

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<sup>160</sup> Lk 10.4

<sup>161</sup> Lk 10.8



has never been to discover what the Bible expects of people but rather with doing what it expects. As Jesus himself pointed out, after you have ‘signed-up’ one of the easiest ways of avoiding the terrible exigency of the spirit of Yahweh is to see the law not as the encapsulation of Yahweh’s spirit but rather as a set of rules which define the limits of acceptable behaviour. We all tend to do this with our own laws, cocking a snook at our lawgivers, for example, by doing all we can to evade paying taxes even while staying within the strict letter of the law. Paul did his best to follow Jesus by putting the written law in its place and concentrating instead on the spirit of Yahweh as manifest in Jesus Christ. How annoyed he would have been to know that in the present day there are many church leaders who are prepared to use his own pronouncements against homosexuality in order to avoid facing up to the exigencies of Yahweh’s spirit encapsulated in the command to love your neighbour as yourself!

##### 5. *Jesus fulfillment strategy as evidenced in the exposure stories*

Where exactly in the Gospels is this fulfilment strategy found? Since we are talking about attempts by Jesus’ to *perform* – in the situations in which he found himself – in accordance with the spirit of Yahweh and since he himself summed up his own view of this spirit in the command ‘love God and the neighbour as yourself’, it would be natural to look to his encounters with other people. How have the stories of such encounters been characterised in recent scholarship? They have been variously described as *controversy* dialogues (R. Bultmann),<sup>162</sup> *pronouncement* stories (Vincent Taylor),<sup>163</sup> or *conflict* or *objection* stories (R. Tannerhill).<sup>164</sup> It is interesting to note that all of these labels envisage Jesus as performing in proactive terms: picturing him as proffering his own ideological views in ideological confrontations. As I see it the sheer multiplicity of categories and subcategories which have had to be developed to deal with these encounters (calling them pronouncement stories only draws attention to those which rather concern acts, and calling them conflict stories only highlights those which clearly aren’t) tends to suggest that the basic approach is wrong. Understood reactively *all* of these stories, including the very similar ones found in John’s Gospel, are seen as accounts of *exposures*; as encounters in which a whole series of people with different problems, questions and criticisms confront Jesus only to find themselves unmasked. What these stories do is to reveal that in the light of his presence people are shown up as having either a straightforward, healthy attitude to life or, alternatively, as shooting a line and pretending to be what they clearly are not.

##### 6. *Jesus fulfillment strategy as exposing either faith or hypocrisy*

If the fulfilment strategy is evidenced in the exposure stories what form do these exposures take? The answer is that as positive exposures they take the form of uncoverings of *faith* whereas as negative exposures they take the form of revelations of *hypocrisy*. The first thing to note about this is that in these stories faith and hypocrisy are seen as opposites; as a basic attitude of pretence, on the one hand, or as a

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<sup>162</sup> Rudolf Bultmann *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921). See Burton Mack *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) p. 172-3

<sup>163</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The formation of the Gospel Tradition*, (London: Macmillan 1933). See Mack, *Myth*, p. 174

<sup>164</sup> Robert Tannehill *Semeia* 20 (The Society of Biblical Literature 1981). See Mack, *Myth*, pp. 175-6

straightforward attitude to life unmarred by any pretence, on the other. This means that at bottom both attitudes are in principal historically verifiable. These people either were or were not pretending and Jesus either did or did not expose them, and both questions are of a sort that historians should be qualified to answer for *in these contexts neither of the words have any sort of religious or eschatological connotation*. Faith does not mean in any way recognizing Jesus as the messiah and hypocrisy does not mean failure to do so.<sup>165</sup> That said, it is interesting also to note that these dispositions are not direct opposites. For hypocrisy is clearly seen as an attitude of those who proclaim a righteous attitude from a stance of self-sufficiency, whereas faith is seen as an attitude displayed by those who make no such claims for themselves but who come to Jesus simply to make demands of him. So in these stories pretence is not the only issue. Added to it is the question of righteousness. Hypocrisy is seen as an affliction of the righteous (not, as is normally the case, as an attribute of the wicked) and faith is defined as an absence of pretensions of any sort.

There is, of course, no way in which scholars could ignore these concepts of faith and hypocrisy, their being far too evident within the Gospel texts. However, they manage to handle them without getting themselves involved in the dreaded business of fulfilment and exposure, first by treating the concepts quite separately.<sup>166</sup> and second by arguing that the term faith should be understood religiously (eschatologically)<sup>167</sup> and that the whole subject of hypocrisy should be dismissed as an invention of the early Church – either due to its ongoing conflict with Judaism<sup>168</sup> or to its change of circumstances.<sup>169</sup>

### 7. *Jesus' fulfillment strategy as evidenced in the parables*

The parables and associated illustrative sayings in the Gospels (similes, metaphors and complex similes etc.) are key players in the fulfilment strategy, not simply because of their undeniably reactive functioning and sheer numbers but because, at least according to common practice, most of them should never have been recorded in the first place.

#### Parables as throw-away speech-forms

The reason for this is that preserving illustrative speech-forms entails not just recording the speech-form itself but also recording the subject matter it illustrates. In the case of ordinary similes and metaphors this is no problem since the saying itself generally includes both the subject matter and the illustration. However, this is not necessarily the

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<sup>165</sup> Readers may find this god-of-the-marginals understanding of Jesus' 'faith' versus 'hypocrisy' set-up, in which he closely follows third Isaiah, unfamiliar. For further reading see my second volume *Light Denied* pp. 258-268.

<sup>166</sup> e.g. Gunther Bornkamm who deals with the subject of hypocrisy on page 82 of his book and with the subject of faith on page 129. *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960)

<sup>167</sup> See Käsemann, *Essays* p. 24; Bornkamm, *Nazareth*, p. 131; Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) p. 226-7; Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) p. 169.

<sup>168</sup> See C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977) p. 97. Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 81, 276

<sup>169</sup> e.g. Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York/ Toronto: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1984) pp. 141-3

case with the more complex illustrative forms in which the subject matter is often what I call an *event*: something which has just happened and been experienced by everyone present. In this case the actual saying itself normally includes only the illustrational speech-form, the subject matter being ‘taken as read’ – since it is that upon which all eyes are at that moment are fixed. This being the case, recording such ‘event-based’ illustrations involves much the same sort of problem as that experienced by people who, returning from a good evening drinking in the pub with friends, seek to share one of the hilarious moments they have enjoyed with the family who have stayed at home. Painful experience teaches you that it is not something that you should normally attempt because though you may well be able to remember quite clearly the punch line which brought the house down it usually proves quite impossible in a few short sentences to describe the situation leading up to it, and without this the punch line falls horribly flat, giving the unfortunate impression that you have lost control over your faculties. The wise person learns not to tempt fate. If there are very few parables or complex similes recorded in ancient writings it is most probably because attempting to do so only demonstrated how seldom the exercise proved worthwhile. It came to be seen that however good a parable-telling performance it was best to enjoy it and leave it at that. In other words it came to be generally acknowledged that parables were throw-away speech-forms. This explains not only the general paucity of such material in ancient writings but also the fact that most of the parables or complex similes which, against the trend, have survived are found within larger *literary* compositions. Here a reader’s prior knowledge of the event does not constitute a problem since the event itself is part and parcel of the larger story the author is recounting. In other words, in the larger story the author delivers to the reader an awareness of the event which is to be targeted, making it a simple matter to insert the parable story subsequently as an illumination of it. Examples of such parables are Isaiah’s song of the vineyard, Nathan’s parable of the ewe lamb and Socrates’ parable of the hunter.<sup>170</sup>

Jesus’ parables as vain attempts to remember and share exposing moments

The fact is that while it is true to say that a limited number of parables and complex similes have survived within ancient literary works, there are almost no examples of what might be called *journalistic* parables, by which I mean simple reports of parable-tellings designed to let others share their exposing impacts. The reason for this is obvious for it is precisely here that the problem of ‘explaining the event’ arises. That said, the really interesting thing is that the way in which Jesus’ parables have been recorded shows that they were clearly preserved in the first instance as free-floating illustrative stories devoid of any subject matter to illustrate, and this can only mean that the intention was to try and share the parabolic experiences which engendered them in spite of all the difficulties. In this regard they resemble, in their rather confused and confusing state, not the few literary parables which were preserved in ancient literature (where the subject matters which the parables illustrate are very clear) but rather the confused ramblings of the person returning from the pub who, though he has a firm grasp of the punch line, experiences the greatest of difficulties in sharing its import!

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<sup>170</sup> Socrates, you will remember, had criticised Hippothales for writing a poem in praise of his lover Lysis, suggesting that he was acting like a hunter who frightens away his quarry.

To be fair it has to be said that on a few occasions the evangelists do manage to reconstruct a plausible event in order to get the parable story to trigger.<sup>171</sup> However, most often they don't even try and on many occasions they simply tell the illustrative story on its own and leave the reader to make the best of it. This, of course, is why the rather curious theory arose that Jesus created these stories so as to make his meaning intentionally riddling and obscure.<sup>172</sup> Indeed this idea has become so fixed in people's minds that however nonsensical it is (and it is indeed pitiable nonsense) it is now almost impossible to erase it by means of good sense and reasoning.

What all this amounts to is the inclusion of over seventy parables/complex similes, accompanied by numerous similes and metaphors within the Gospel texts,<sup>173</sup> all of them in a very dubious state of preservation, very few of which should normally have survived. Though this tells us comparatively little about the actual impact Jesus was seeking to create with his illustrative speech forms – since we cannot now be at all sure of the original context of any of them – it does tell us that he must have been a quite extraordinary parable-maker, since people were clearly willing to make considerable fools of themselves in remembering and passing on his stories, even though doing so made little or no sense. From this simple fact alone we can as historians be absolutely certain that the historical Jesus operated as a great unmasker of first century Palestinian society since that is the only conceivable function for such illustrative speech-forms in the sort of situations in which he was recorded as operating. So from this bizarre behaviour of his followers in remembering and recording his parable stories against all precedent, when doing so was perfectly futile, we have *the strongest possible evidence* for the historicity of the fulfilment strategy.<sup>174</sup>

Parables: a hopeless tool for delivering ideological messages

For their part, proponents of the perfecting strategy envisage Jesus' parables proactively; as his curiously original way of spelling out his ideological message. The fact that it would have been simpler, less confusing and altogether better for him to have delivered such messages in a straightforward manner has meant that reasons have had to be invented to explain this original and curious approach. One explanation has been that the messages were coded because they were subversive. Such an explanation has foundered on the simple fact that most of the so-called messages tortuously extracted from these stories turn out to be not in the least bit subversive. Another explanation has been that the messages were intentionally presented as riddles, to concentrate attention on them. This argument too has been shown to hold no water for riddles do not in point of fact concentrate attention on the message they deliver. Rather they concentrate attention on the enjoyable exercise of solving the puzzle, the message itself becoming almost an irrelevance. A third explanation has been to suggest that Jesus delivered his messages in a hidden form in order to give his hearers time to adjust to them. This explanation too has been revealed as bogus since the stories possess no mechanism whereby time is allowed for people to get used to their

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<sup>171</sup> e.g. Lk 10.25.

<sup>172</sup> See Mk 4.11-12, 33-34.

<sup>173</sup> Including the Gospel of Thomas. For complete list see *Light Denied* Chapter 2.

<sup>174</sup> See my previous two books *Painfully Clear: The Parables of Jesus* and *Light Denied: A Challenger to Historians* for more on parables as the key to Jesus' strategy.

messages. For the simple fact is that you either do not understand the message – because you do not have the code – or else you understand it completely – because the code has been cracked. A final explanation has been to suggest that the stories operate in a completely original way, as creative art. Quite apart from it being altogether improbable that Jesus invented a completely new way of communicating, this explanation founders on the simple fact that had he done so no one would have understood what he was about until the twentieth century when such a way of storytelling eventually evolved.

The fact is that the only reason why the idea ever came about that Jesus proactively delivered messages by means of illustrative speech-forms *against the common practice established since time immemorial throughout the Ancient Near East*, is that they were preserved in the tradition as free-floating stories and the early Church found it impossible either to remember and record the events which had triggered them in the first place or to reconstruct suitable artificial ones later on. That it was never the intention of the synoptic evangelists to present Jesus as using illustrative speech-forms to announce a new ideological message can be seen most clearly by looking at John's Gospel.

#### 8. *Jesus' fulfillment strategy as evidenced in John's 'Light' theme.*

John's Gospel contains quite a bit of illustrative material but it is of a very different sort from that found in the other Gospels. This is mainly because it is highly controlled and stylised. There is a handful of parables<sup>175</sup> and complex similes<sup>176</sup> but they are unmistakably literary constructs: the illustrations and their subject matters being carefully composed and set side by side with explanations given where any confusion might arise.<sup>177</sup> Just from these facts alone it is evident that, unlike the other evangelists, John is not concerned to use the free-floating 'stories' which the early Church had remembered, to offer his readers reconstructions of the historical Jesus as an illustrationist at work. But this does not mean that John ignores the fulfilment strategy. On the contrary, of all the evangelists he provides the clearest and most irrefutable picture of it. However, whereas the Synoptic evangelists, writing earlier, attempt to witness to this strategy by giving their readers a taste of Jesus' actual performance, John does so by spelling it out almost theoretically. Though I have no way of proving the point it seems likely to me that John had come to realise that the previous evangelists had been unable to establish a clear picture of the fulfilment strategy because of the great difficulty they experienced in finding suitable events within the traditional material to trigger the free-floating illustrative speech-forms which had been stored.<sup>178</sup> He therefore decided to avoid using these logia in his own work and to establish the fulfilment strategy by using the Isaianic light-theme instead. This way he was able to place Jesus' fulfilment strategy at the centre of his work in a manner that was altogether unmistakable.

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<sup>175</sup> *The Best-man*. Jn. 3.29; *The Door*. Jn. 10.7-9; *The Good Shepherd*. Jn. 10.2-5 & 8.10-16; *The grain of Wheat*. Jn. 12.24; *The True Vine*. Jn. 15.1-6.

<sup>176</sup> *The Wind*. Jn. 3.8; *The Sower and the Reaper*. Jn. 4.37; *The Burning Lamp*. Jn.5.35; *The Pain of Child-birth*. Jn. 16.21.

<sup>177</sup> e.g. Jn. 2.21.

<sup>178</sup> They were apparently unwilling to simply invent new hypothetical events

Because of this, no one reading the Gospel of John can fail to appreciate the picture he presents of Jesus as the fulfiller of Israel's covenant responsibilities;<sup>179</sup> as the one who, in acting perfectly in accordance with the spirit of Yahweh as revealed in Torah, effectively exposed what was going on round about;<sup>180</sup> as the one who thereby made justice possible,<sup>181</sup> enabling Yahweh to bring in his salvation so that the nations, seeing this salvation, flocked to the exposing light; as the one whose revelations so infuriated the Judean 'righteous' that they vainly attempted to extinguish the exposing light by dispatching the light-bearer.

But wasn't John speaking of Jesus' work in terms of perfection of the Law rather than its fulfilment when he wrote: 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'? In making this statement John was clearly viewing Jesus' achievement from a post-resurrection viewpoint, which means that we cannot read what he says as his understanding of what Jesus saw himself as doing. Clearly John believed that Jesus had successfully fulfilled Israel's task to be God's light. This being the case it is perfectly understandable that he saw this as an achievement which radically changed things for those coming afterwards. What this achievement was and how it changed matters for people like us we will deal when we come to discuss the resurrection in the final Chapter.

Because John makes the fulfilment and exposure strategy so evident and so central to his Gospel, the only way in which scholarship has been able to suffocate it, so as to give some air to their preferred and less threatening perfecting strategy, has been to declare John and his Gospel unhistorical! For my part I find their efforts to sideline the fulfilment idea and replace it with the notion of perfection unconvincing. I therefore have no hesitation in declaring fulfilment to be Jesus' unique historical approach and the perfection hypothesis dead. We need now only hammer one final nail in its coffin.

*9. The notion of progress - intrinsic to the perfection strategy - as anachronistic*  
Perfection, as the imaginary end-point of progressively rising standards, is a modern liberal idea. It is based on the scientific discovery of the phenomenon of development (evolution) coupled with the bourgeois idea of competition. Wright uses this idea without realising what he is doing when he argues that the Mosaic standards were quite adequate in their time but, with the new action of God in bringing in Israel's restoration, the standards were transcended, thereby demonstrating that the Mosaic Torah and Temple were no longer adequate.<sup>182</sup> We, of course, are so used to the notion

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<sup>179</sup> Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words? Jn. 5.45-47

<sup>180</sup> "The world ... hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil." Jn. 7.7 "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word." Jn 8.43.

<sup>181</sup> "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jn. 8.12

<sup>182</sup> 'Jesus' actions and words in the Temple ... functioned symbolically in more or less the same way as his actions and words concerning the Torah. In neither case was there a denial that the institution itself was good, god-given, and to be respected. In both cases there was an assertion that the time had come for the institution to be transcended.' Wright, *Victory*, p. 433.

of progress – one of the fundamental principles of enlightenment and post-enlightenment thinking – that we hardly ever notice its presence underlying many common ideas we employ such as this notion of perfection. Because of this we are all too ready to read it back into ancient texts, forgetting that it was largely unknown in the ancient world. Both William Wrede and Schweitzer pointed this out at the beginning of the last century when they underlined the total absence of the idea of *progress*, along with its closely connected idea of *development*, in Mark's Gospel and the danger of trying to read it back in:

It will now have become plain that *the Gospel of Mark exhibits nothing in the way of progress in the understanding of the disciples*, and indeed that it is perverse in principle to look for it here.  
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Mark knows nothing of any development in Jesus, ... he only knows that from first to last [the disciples] were in all respects equally wanting in understanding; he does not know that the first period was a period of success and the second a period of failure; he represents the Pharisees and Herodians as (from 3.6 onwards) resolved upon the death of Jesus, while the people, down to the very last day when He preached in the temple, are enthusiastically loyal to Him. All these [developmental schemes] of which the Evangelist says nothing – and they are the foundations of the modern view – should first be proved, if proved they can be; they ought not to be simply read into the text as something self-evident. For it is just those things which appear so self-evident to the prevailing critical temper which are in reality the least evident of all.<sup>184</sup>

Indeed, when the evangelists do employ the word perfect (τελειος) in their texts, as in Mathew 5.48 for example, it does not mean perfect in our progressive or developmental sense at all. Rather it means doing something completely; fulfilling or accomplishing it. However, it seems that scholars have yet to learn this lesson, which means that they continue to try and sell us this worthless idea of a perfecting strategy.

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<sup>183</sup> W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (London: James Clarke, 1971 [1901]) p. 107. Speaking more generally about the composition of the Gospel he says: 'If one considers together the *different portions* of the account [given by Mark] one discovers that in general no internal sequence is provided. Several stories are indeed often held together by the same situation, by a chronological or other type of remark; smaller sections complete in themselves can be isolated; and we even get references back to something said earlier, such as in 6.52, 8.17ff. But on the whole one portion stands next to the other with a piecemeal effect. There is naturally a connection, but it is the connection of ideas and not of historical developments. ... It follows from this that we must not draw conclusions from what [Mark] says which he has not himself drawn, or establish connections which are not manifest. ... At the bottom of such connections there lies a false overall view of the type of authorship that we have in Mark. Not by a single syllable does he indicate that he desires to see two facts brought into connection which he happens to tell one after the other. For this reason it is not legitimate to manufacture such a connection.' *Secret*, p. 132.

<sup>184</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Quest*, p. 330





## Chapter 4.

### **Towards an Ideology of the Hebrew Bible.**

Let us begin by reviewing the principles we have established regarding the production of a satisfactory portrait of the historical Jesus:

- The portrait must be fully historical, controlled only by the evidence eschewing unverifiable theological data and seeing Jesus simply as a first-century Israelite peasant-artisan living in a Graeco-Roman world.<sup>185</sup>
- The portrait must be fully political, showing Jesus as involved in taking care of his own personal and collective interests as all human beings are.<sup>186</sup> This does not mean excluding his religious beliefs but it does mean that a narrow religious understanding of him is unacceptable.
- The portrait must be fully biblical with no pretence that Jesus aimed to introduce a new religion.<sup>187</sup> This means that only an old-dispensation portrait will do, Jesus' strategy being seen as fulfilling Torah not 'relativising' or 'perfecting' it.

Given this basic position the first thing we have to do is to establish an understanding of *the ideology of the Jewish Bible*. For according to the fulfilment strategy this has to be the measure of Jesus' actions and words *whether we account his life as a successful demonstration of this ideology at work or not*. So what has Old Testament scholarship to tell us about this biblical ideology? In accordance with our methodology we will take a look at the work of two very different scholars to try and get an understanding of the range of responses.<sup>188</sup>

#### *The Ideology of the Jewish Bible in the Work of John Bright.*

John Bright does not employ the word ideology.<sup>189</sup> Like Sanders he highlights Israel's *religion* as the characteristic which marked out the community from all the other peoples in the Ancient Near East.<sup>190</sup> However, he is at pains to point out that Israel's religion was not an abstract phenomenon – an idea about God – but rather an

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<sup>185</sup> See pp. 9-10 above.

<sup>186</sup> See p. 13 above.

<sup>187</sup> See p. 16 above.

<sup>188</sup> I have my own reasons for my choice of scholars (one pink, one blue, one old, one new). Of course many good reasons could be put forward for criticising my choice. However, since my desire is simply to show that, despite all the advances made during my lifetime, no scholar has come to see what I clearly see in the Jewish Bible, no choice I could have made would have produced a significant difference.

<sup>189</sup> Some would say ideology wasn't much in evidence in biblical scholarship in 1960, which to my mind is no excuse since it is clearly evident in most texts from the ancient Near East, including the Bible.

<sup>190</sup> 'No history of Israel can proceed without some consideration of [her] religion, for it was this alone that set Israel off from her environment and made her the distinctive and creative phenomenon that she was. Apart from it Israel's history neither is explicable nor, one might add, would it be especially significant.' J. Bright, *The History of Israel* (London: SCM Press 1960) p 128 / 144. Paragraph unchanged from the first edition.

historically based awareness.<sup>191</sup> Clearly he sees Israel's distinctiveness as built on two key beliefs: election and covenant. The problem, however, is that he describes these beliefs in such a way as to render them politically colourless. Indeed the ideology Bright presents us with is as drained of political content as that of Sanders. If one asks "Who is this Yahweh?" Bright can reply - "A god who is loving, righteous and even-handed!" to be sure, but he will be forced to add if pressed - "A god who in terms of the politics of interests is blind". Consequently, if one further asks - "Why did Yahweh choose Israel?" I can only suppose he would reply that he didn't know or that the selection was arbitrary.<sup>192</sup>

When it comes to accounting for the genesis of Israel's religion Bright disregards social and party political factors to concentrate exclusively on revelation and individual genius:

That [Israel] brought the worship of Yahweh with her from the desert is quite certain, for, as we have seen, no trace of it can be found in Palestine or elsewhere before her arrival. To doubt that her faith was communicated to her by some great religious personality, namely, Moses, is entirely subjective. Israel's notion of God was unique in the ancient world, and a phenomenon that defies rational explanation.<sup>193</sup>

This view is especially surprising given the recent shift in opinion regarding Israel's historical beginnings. Following a natural reading of the pentateuchal texts it used to be taken for granted that, like the Philistines, Israel acquired her 'promised land' by invasion. Indeed, given only the information that until very recently was available it would have been all but impossible to conceive of this event in any other way, seeing that all of the many conquests known about in the ancient world were of this type. But archaeological discoveries have increasingly made this 'invasion' view suspect, causing scholars to look for a more satisfactory explanation. George Mendenhall was the first to propose the 'revolution' or 'peasant's revolt' scenario.<sup>194</sup> This new model proved so persuasive that even Bright converted and as a result rewrote certain sections of his classic work *A History of Israel*. However, it did not cause him to alter by one iota his view that Israel's place in world history was the result of revelation and religious genius rather than of her material social origins. This was strange since, clearly, the

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<sup>191</sup> 'Israel's religion cannot be discussed in the abstract as though it consisted of a set of beliefs about God, about the world, and about the proper conduct of life, to which all Israelites supposedly subscribed. To describe it so would be to misrepresent it. Israel's religion did not consist of abstract beliefs, but centred rather in an intense awareness of a relationship that was believed to exist between God and his people, namely, the belief that Yahweh had chosen Israel as the object of his especial favour and that Israel had, in turn, committed herself to him as his people.: This belief both brought the early Israelite tribal organization into being and imparted to it its distinctive character.' Bright, *History*, p. 128 /144.

<sup>192</sup> I say this because, of course, Bright does not discuss the subject. In his own criticism of Bright's work Norman Gottwald makes a similar point. He juxtaposes religion not with politics, as I do, but with the socio-political matrix, because writing from a Marxist standpoint he is concerned to make it clear that he does not see ideas as primary features which arrive in one's mind by accident or revelation but as a direct consequence of one's social situation. In this I have no quarrel with him. See Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (London: SCM Press, 1979) p. 594. See also *The Quest For the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honour of George E. Mendenhall.* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983) p. 6.

<sup>193</sup> Bright, *History*, p. 132 / 148.

<sup>194</sup> G. E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition*, (London: John Hopkins University Press Ltd. 1973)

more we discover of Israel's socio-political background the less need we have of the concept of revelation to explain the historical growth of her religion.<sup>195</sup>

If scholars like Bright and Sanders are more than willing to see the Bible as concerned with individual politics, with ethics and morals, why are they so loath to admit its concern with group or 'party' politics? It is true that the modern reader is more inclined to view the Bible as a religious book than as a political book but this is simply because it tends to discuss matters using inter-personal language.<sup>196</sup> What people forget is that *all* of the ideological texts from the ancient Near East are expressed in this same inter-personal language. To be consistent, therefore, people like Bright and Sanders should argue that the Egyptians, Hittites and Mesopotamians were equally keen to eschew party-political debate but of course they don't because no one is so obtuse as to aver that pre-scientific people were naturally apolitical.

Since the political question (the handling of human power and creativity in individual and social settings) has always been a crucial aspect of human life it seems to me that we should take it as read that *all* peoples at *all* times have been interested in it *even when it is clear that they had no name for it and no specific vocabulary wherewith to describe their findings*. This being the case the question becomes: how did the Israelites and their contemporaries communicate about ideological matters? The short answer is that they talked about the power/creativity question and expressed their fundamental ethical and party-political ideas representationally and symbolically *in terms of the personal characteristics and demands of their chosen deities*. In other words they talked politics in what most biblical scholars so confusingly call 'religious' language!

This may seem a curious state of affairs but it has to be remembered that ancient men's and women's lack of *political* vocabulary was not an isolated phenomenon. The fact is that they had little or no *psychological* vocabulary either. It is very easy for us to forget that the writers of the Jewish Bible – and their contemporaries in the Ancient Near East – had no *direct* way of expressing people's inner dialogue with themselves: what we refer to as their thinking. Where we would write 'he thought' they could only write 'he said', sometimes adding an explanatory phrase such as 'in his heart'. This inability

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<sup>195</sup> Gottwald is amazed by Bright's obduracy in this regard: 'In the second edition of his *A History of Israel*, John Bright has gone a long way towards adopting Mendenhall's proposal for "a peasant revolt" or "withdrawal" model of the Hebrew conquest. It is, therefore, of more than passing interest to note what conclusions, if any, he draws for an interpretation of the religion of early Israel from his understanding of the conquest as "an inside job". It turns out that he has drawn no conclusions of any substance, but has instead continued to advance an unrevised view of Yahwism which sees it as a "faith" starkly contrasted with the history of Israel, as a course of events otherwise of little significance except for the religious interpretation given them. ... What other instance do we possess for the ancient Near East of the underclass from a feudal society overthrowing their lords and living in an egalitarian social system over a wide area of formerly feudalised land for two centuries before becoming a monarchy? ... Israel's socio-political egalitarian mode of life, involving an entire populace of formerly oppressed peoples, was unique in its explicitness and in its spatiotemporal effectiveness. ... only there, to our knowledge, did an egalitarian tribal life wrest control from imperial-feudal hands and succeed in establishing a sustained vocal alternative social order.' *Tribes*, p. 593.

<sup>196</sup> 'Probably because of these interpersonal connotations of the biblical vocabulary, we tend to miss its primary, political import. We are so used to hearing that vocabulary in a religious context ... that we naturally assume that it is religious. It is not. It is political.' J. P. M. Walsh, *The Mighty From Their Thrones*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) p. 62

accounts in part for the great prevalence of dreams, visitations, and apparitions in the Bible. It is easy to take such descriptions at face value and either accredit biblical writers with unusual spiritual powers or else write them off as superstitious primitives. Such an approach, however, is immature and the conclusions drawn in both directions unwarranted. To take these passages seriously is to understand them as the products of ordinary down-to-earth people like ourselves who were faced with the problem of describing psychological phenomena without the verbal tools we all take, today, so much for granted.

Once you realise that the biblical writers had little abstract vocabulary with which to communicate their political or psychological ideas you begin to understand that the Bible itself is not primarily a 'religious' or 'spiritual' book as people have often supposed. Only when you do this can you begin to see the extraordinary political figure/idea of Yahweh, '*God of the Marginals*', lying at its heart, the book itself being a kind of extended ideological manifesto written by intelligent but ordinary people like ourselves who were followers of this figure/idea.

*The Ideology of the Jewish Bible in the Work of Norman Gottwald.*

Like Bright and Sanders, Gottwald sees Israel's religion as her ideological power house.<sup>197</sup> However, his position is radically different in that he sees religion as a secondary phenomenon: a projection of a community's power interests.<sup>198</sup> So, ultimately, he finds Israel's socio-political matrix determinative, rather than her religion.<sup>199</sup> I have a number of criticisms to make of Gottwald's understanding of religion in general and Israel's religion in particular but let me make it clear that I have no quarrel with his basic position that ideology (including religion) is a secondary phenomenon dependent on the real life-processes of human beings,<sup>200</sup> or with his

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<sup>197</sup> 'This counter-society [ancient Israel] had to provide for political self-rule, economic self-help, military self-defence, and cultural self-definition, which gave to its religion (so-called Yahwism) a very prominent role as an alternative ideology for understanding the legitimacy and efficacy of its revolution.' Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 7.

<sup>198</sup> See his own quotation from Marx in *Tribes*, p. 632.

<sup>199</sup> 'If the religion that accompanies and justifies and energises statism (as in Canaanite society) is a projection of power interests there is every reason to believe that the religion that accompanies and justifies and energises tribalism or intertribalism (as in Israel) is also a projection of power interests.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 601. See also *Quest*, p. 6: 'One of the features that nomadic, conquest, and amphictyonic models share in common is an exaggerated concentration on the religious "uniqueness" of Israel, an almost exclusive focus on religious factors to the neglect of the sociopolitical matrix and constitution of Israel. In advancing a social revolutionary model of early Israel we are not only attending to the inadequacies in the other models but we are introducing a "demythologising" or "secularising" element that aims not to eliminate the religion, nor to reduce its importance, but to set the religion of ancient Israel in its necessary ancient social and cultural matrix, to give that religion a greater measure of social plausibility or credibility.'

<sup>200</sup> 'We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process . . . Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by

sociological approach in which Israel's God is treated as a function of social processes. This, as I see it, is perfectly justified by our first principle that all historical research must be controlled by evidence alone, with no theological interference.<sup>201</sup>

*1. Religion is not simply a rationalization of class conflict.*

Gottwald seems to embrace the Marxist position that religion operates as a justification of the dominant class' perspective which means that we can expect it to evaporate when class struggle eventually causes the class system to disappear.<sup>202</sup> He tentatively claims that the growing numbers of atheists and agnostics in the world could be a sign of this natural evolution.<sup>203</sup> However, he leaves open the possibility that in the prehistoric world before the development of class stratification a more pervasive form of consciousness may have existed, separated from beliefs in gods as personal beings or invisible forces, and that if this was the case then such a consciousness may continue to persist even after the normal class-induced religion disappears.<sup>204</sup> That said, he wonders whether we would be justified in calling this remaining consciousness religion.<sup>205</sup>

As regards the evidence provided by the rise of atheism, personal experience does not lead me to see any obvious connection between religion and class consciousness or between atheism and a lack of it. So I would suggest that the belief that the rise of

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consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.' Marx as quoted by Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 633.

<sup>201</sup> See above p. 48. In this regard it is interesting to note that Walter Brueggemann distinguishes his approach from that of Gottwald not to criticise Gottwald but rather to justify his own right to do theology: 'Faithful to his method, (Gottwald) treats God in ancient Israel as a *function of the social processes*. To do Old Testament theology, however, one must ask not only about Yahweh as a function of social processes but about the character of Yahweh as a *free agent* who has a life and interiority all God's own. W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) p.9.

<sup>202</sup> 'If, as (Marx) thought, religion is chiefly or exclusively a form of class justification and of class struggle (whether employed by the dominators or by the dominated) it follows logically that with the disappearance of class struggle, religion will also disappear.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 637.

<sup>203</sup> 'Another class of evidence is the growing body of persons who count themselves either as atheists or as agnostics, or whose experience and interpretation of the traditional religious traditions and dogmas is moving steadily in the direction of evacuating them of any objective - i.e., of any nonhuman or superhuman - content.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 637.

<sup>204</sup> 'If, however, it turns out that religion is a more pervasive form of consciousness that cannot be restricted to any of the known religions, or to all of them taken together, and is further separable from belief in gods as personal beings or as invisible forces, it may be that its origins are anterior to social stratification in a form of ideation which tries to grasp the synthetic human experience of the interpenetrating mode of production, network of social relations, and elaborated cultural products as a coherent but changing, even fragile, totality. If that possibility is admissible to a cultural-materialist orientation, religious consciousness in which people did not alienate their selfhood may at one time in prehistory have preceded the distorted sublimations that accompanied class divisions. If so, such religious consciousness (comparable to the attributes of "socialist consciousness" or of "religious naturalism") might continue indefinitely into the future.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 637.

<sup>205</sup> 'Of course, a religious consciousness differentiated from belief in the dogmatic content and observance of the liturgy of any particular religion is sufficiently unlike religion as we know it to raise the question of the appropriateness of labelling it as "religion", or even as "religious consciousness".' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 637.

atheism and agnosticism goes hand in hand with the demise of class conflict is wishful thinking on the part of Marxists. As regards the general view that religion is a rationalization of class conflict I would point out that while a number of the Sumerian deities fit admirably into this Marxist pattern (The great gods Enlil and Enki certainly represent the interests and aspirations of the military aristocracy and the priestly scribal administrators. Likewise Dimuzi clearly stands for the interests of the shepherds, Enkimdu those of the farmers and Martu those of the rootless fringe dwellers on the edges of civilised society.) there are any number of major deities who don't (Utu and Nana the sun and moon gods, for example, and Nammu the goddess of the watery deep). Indeed it would be difficult to account for any of the major goddesses, given such a point of departure: Nintu the mother goddess, Ereshkigal the goddess of the underworld and Inanna who as female has a domain so powerful yet so intriguingly vague and intangible.

My basic problem with Gottwald's Marxist understanding of religion is not so much with what it explains as with what it doesn't. Take for example the experience we all encounter very early in our lives: that the universe is biased – that when it comes to the matter of getting what you want from life certain types of individuals and groups (the strong, healthy, intelligent, resourceful and adaptable) are favoured over others. Darwin labelled these individuals and groups as 'the fittest' and the people of the ancient Near East labelled them as 'those whom the gods had blessed' but clearly both were talking about the same phenomenon. This realization that the universe is biased is enshrined as a foundational principle in all the religions of the ancient Near East yet it has no validation in terms of class struggle that I can see. Indeed, as a principle it cuts across class interests and fits more comfortably with the post (and possibly pre?) stratification idea of meritocracy. Then again, take the experience all revolutionary groups encounter: that the throwing off of hierarchical restraints and responsibilities releases an unimaginable blossoming of talent and compensating responsibility amongst ordinary people, giving rise to the belief that with a revolutionary ideology in command nothing is impossible.<sup>206</sup> This realization was enshrined in Israel's religion in the covenant belief that though she was one of the smallest and most insignificant powers in the region, as long as she was faithful to Yahweh he would defend her and make her impregnable. Once again this realization is in no way validated by class struggle, which works on the principle of collective force and coercion. The fact that ancient Near Eastern religions contain such foundational principles, clearly based on experience, demonstrates that the religions themselves cannot be explained simply as the rationalizations of class interests. This means we shall have to look elsewhere for an explanation for their genesis.

This conviction is reinforced by the difficulty of understanding why class conflict should have given rise to the mythological superstructure, as Gottwald suggests.<sup>207</sup> The fact that competing economic classes in the ancient Near East certainly used the mythological superstructure to rationalize their interests and advocate their struggles does not of itself prove that they invented it for such a purpose. To my mind a much

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<sup>206</sup> See for example the attitude of the Maoist red guards with their 'little red book'.

<sup>207</sup> 'The essential feature of such a (post class-stratification) consciousness of the whole context of human life would be the exclusion of all nonmaterial reality as the religious object, i.e., the exclusion of gods and spirits as nonhuman or superhuman beings.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 637.

more convincing hypothesis for the origin of the mythological superstructure is that it was a conceptual device designed to enable early humans to reflect on, discuss and get a hold on the phenomena they experienced around them. This would, of course have included class conflict but it would also have included many other experiential matters besides, such as all the unseen forces which people experience as controlling the universe. These include – in Israel’s case – the metacosmic ones such as Yahweh’s ‘still small voice’ and – in the Church’s case – the ‘resurrection’. If I am right the fact that the mythological superstructure was clearly a human invention does not mean that the matters which were discussed by means of it were therefore simply rationalizations. They may have been – as when class interests were being justified – but in many cases they were clearly not – as when matters of ordinary human experience were being discussed.

2. *It is wrong to read twentieth century strategies back into the biblical texts*

As a Marxist Gottwald is convinced that a scientific analysis of the way in which all human societies develop shows that the direction of progress is naturally towards a classless/stateless society, various changes having been passed through on the way: generally speaking a bourgeois followed by a proletarian revolution. This conviction (which certainly makes a lot of sense to me) enables him to judge that Israel’s attempt to set up a retribalised society<sup>208</sup> in central Palestine between 1250 and 1050 BCE was a truly progressive undertaking but one that was almost bound to fail (as of course it did) since, according to his understanding, it was highly premature.<sup>209</sup>

For Gottwald, Israel’s chances of succeeding would have been greatly enhanced had she managed to avoid isolation by spreading the movement:

As far as I can see, the social revolution of Israel would have had to spread much farther than it did in order to have created a "balance of power" favourable to the continued success of its form of retribalized social organization. For instance, had Israel's social revolution spread to the Philistines, the immediate external threat that prompted the rise of monarchy in Israel would have been avoided. But as long as any strong centralized state existed in the ancient Near East or vicinity there would have been the threat of foreign conquest of the retribalized societies.<sup>210</sup>

In writing thus Gottwald shows that he is reading the texts as a twentieth century CE strategist, having in mind the Russian revolution and its great debate regarding the correct way in which the proletarian revolution should be conducted: either from a fixed base, Stalin’s argument, or as a worldwide subversive movement in Trotsky’s view. There is nothing wrong in doing this, of course, just so long as you don’t start reading such strategic thoughts back into the texts themselves. This I believe Gottwald does when he suggests that Israel’s revolutionary leadership probably believed that the community would be safe to do her own thing just so long as she did not present too

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<sup>208</sup> A classless and stateless form of society.

<sup>209</sup> ‘... Israel’s attempted break with the ancient Near Eastern state structure could be evaluated as a progressive undertaking, although perhaps totally premature and in any case ultimately unsuccessful for any number of reasons.’ Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 21. Does Gottwald believe, I wonder, that such a society would have a better chance of survival today against American imperialism and globalisation?

<sup>210</sup> Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 21.

tempting a target to the surrounding hierarchical powers.<sup>211</sup> It is true the prophets accused Israel's leaders of apeing the expansionist and wealth-seeking ways of foreign rulers but there is no indication that they believed such a practice was dangerous because it made Israel into a target. On the contrary the texts show the strategic reasoning to be altogether different: the prophets' belief was that Israel should keep her attention fixed on her side of the covenant agreement and leave the business of her defence strictly to Yahweh. Consequently the prophets accused Israel's rulers of failing to do their own covenantal job and, instead, occupying themselves with what was Yahweh's sole responsibility. Of course such a strategy raises huge questions but these we shall have to leave to a later chapter.

### 3. *Israel did not view Yahweh as egalitarian or other gods as hierarchical.*

When defining Yahwism as the ideology of early Israel the term Gottwald uses is 'egalitarianism' or 'social equality'. Likewise when defining the opposing Canaanite ideology the term he uses is hierarchy.<sup>212</sup> I have already pointed out that equality and hierarchy are not biblical notions.<sup>213</sup> Of course Gottwald is conducting a sociological analysis and as such these terms are perfectly admissible as *a sociological description* of the structure of early societies as recorded in the biblical texts. Such terms only become inadmissible when they are seen as descriptions of Israel's own thought forms. Gottwald could well argue that he is not concerned to describe Israel's thinking; however, he gets dangerously close to doing so at times:

Israel thought it was different because it was different: it constituted an egalitarian social system in the midst of stratified societies, a system which congealed diverse peoples and functioned viably in the Canaanite highlands for at least two centuries.<sup>214</sup>

It may be argued that even here Gottwald never actually says that Israel saw herself as an egalitarian society operating amongst hierarchical ones. However, he never actually admits that she didn't and this of itself means that he never gets round to posing the question as to how Israel *did* see her position. His attitude is always that of an outside scientific observer raking over some very interesting dead social remains. This means that he never really grasps Israel's central strategy, never sees what she was truly up to.

### *We Are On Our Own*

This brief look at the work of two Old Testament scholars shows that we are not going to be able simply to read off the ideology of the Jewish Bible from them. Indeed, in

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<sup>211</sup> 'Many of the prophets, it seems, favoured Israel taking great risks with national security. If I judge rightly what underlies their argument sociopolitically, they were implying something like this: if we decentralize, either by total retribalization or by sharply limiting the monarchic institutions, we will not have the imperial ambitions and the piles of surplus wealth that invite conquest and plunder. I am not at all convinced that Assyria would have desisted from attacking a retribalized Israel but the attacks might have been less severe and hardly more catastrophic than what transpired.' Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 22.

<sup>212</sup> 'The intent of biblical theology to characterize the distinctiveness of early Israel is better served by depicting the religion of Yahweh as the symbolic bonding dimension of a synthetic egalitarian, intertribal counter-society, originating within and breaking off from hierarchic, stratified Canaanite society.'

Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 692

<sup>213</sup> See p. 14 above.

<sup>214</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 693



many ways the picture which they give of this ideology is just as confused and contradictory as the portraits which New Testament scholars present of the historical Jesus himself. Since practically all Old Testament scholars take up a position in between Bright on the conservative fringe of liberalism on the right and Gottwald on the radical wing of socialism on the left we are clearly on our own. By this I do not mean that we will have to abandon altogether the work of scholarship and begin again from scratch. We will use the work they have done on the texts but we must always be ready to make adjustments where their own ideological persuasions have caused them to skew the results. Before we set about this task it will be as well if we establish a clear picture in our minds of the ideological scene we shall be dealing with.

### *The Ideological scene*

Ideology is a tricky word since people employ it in different ways and often fail to define their usage. For example when they do not mean it derogatively, denoting what they judge to be their opponents' airy fairy notions lacking substance and authority - 'All that's just ideology!' - they generally employ it as a convenience term to cover the particular group of ideas they happen to think important. Thus Sanders uses it as a term for the religious ideas constituting a particular faith scheme whereas Crossan and Gottwald tend to associate it with political ideas.

In an ideology one is dealing, of course, with a spectrum of interrelated ideas. However, in order to achieve a grasp of the whole one has to begin by examining a range of individual ideas. Let us start by looking at a few which Crossan has introduced.

#### 1 Hierarchy and egalitarianism

The chief way in which Crossan distinguishes Jesus from his opponents is by using the hierarchy/egalitarian contrast. As a structure rather than as an idea, a hierarchy is the name given to an organized system of dominance and subordination. The idea justifying such an organization, setting aside the possible belief that it is natural or god-given, is the notion that a group is better able to develop its potential (especially economic or military) if its members agree to forego their individual autonomy and offer allegiance to a superior.

A hierarchical community has different aspects, depending on how it is viewed. Analysed in terms of the distribution of power it appears as an unequalness or *stratification* - some individuals in the community possessing more power than others. Viewed geographically it appears as *a centralization* - an outsider is unable to deal with the community as an 'ensemble' but is forced to view it as it is expressed at its centre. In other words stratification and centralization are different aspects of hierarchy.

Two considerations are worth noting. First, many people, because of their age or physical condition, are condemned by life itself to a subordinate position. For them there is no question of there being an *agreement* to limit their power and responsibility since these have already been limited by factors over which they have no control. Such people would be dependent upon if not subordinate to others whether or not

hierarchical structures had ever seen the light of day. Second, it is a moot point how much the hierarchical patterning of human society is voluntary and how much it is instinctual. It *may* be that, as a species, we are naturally predisposed to organizing ourselves hierarchically.

The opposite of an hierarchical structure is an egalitarian one. The idea sustaining egalitarianism is that it is wrong both to crave other people's responsibility and to agree to give up your own. In an egalitarian structure there is no stratification since power is distributed equally amongst the members of the group. There is no centralisation either and the group can only be encountered as an 'ensemble'.

Hierarchy and egalitarianism are what we might call *political* ideas since they are concerned with *the power question* – how human expression and creativity is catered for within the community and how it is expected that it should be exercised.

## 2 Patronage

The idea on which patronage is founded is the 'favour', one of two basic technical ideas that provide a way in which goods and services can be put on offer within a community, the other being payment. Like payment the favour is a reciprocal arrangement, the only difference being in the time lapse, which has the effect of binding the parties into an unbalanced relationship until the deal is paid off. In democratic favour-systems people have to find ways of dealing with this peculiarity and consequently develop different sorts of 'I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine' arrangements to redress the imbalance. In the form of patronage this favour notion is made into something quite new by its absorption into a hierarchical context. Here the favour is begged by someone who is not, and can never hope to be, in a position to return it. In other words, with patronage a favour is granted by someone who has it within their power to do so only through their social position. Furthermore it is done in return for nothing but the other's eternal sense of obligation and indebtedness. So, whereas in favour systems great pains are taken to nullify the imbalance created by the inevitable payment time-lapse, in patronage systems the enslavement effects are assiduously cultivated.

You would scarcely call the favour idea a political construct since it has no real connection with how power is used or where it lies. Basically it constitutes a deferred payment, and payment (in terms of money or kind) is a technical idea since its realization enabled communities to progress from the very primitive stage at which goods could only be distributed by exchange, gift or robbery. In other words payment was an essential technique in the advance towards civilization, and favour a further refinement.

Patronage, on the other hand, is clearly concerned with how power is used and where it lies since it works on the basis that one party in the relationship is blessed with possibilities which only come with social standing. However, this is a secondary feature, acquired from the hierarchical setting, since the basis of patronage is always the favour and this remains what we have termed a technical construct. Here then we have a clear example of a political structure colouring a technical entity and thereby

producing something quite different. What I mean by this is not that in Mediterranean hierarchical societies the favour technique disappeared - it was still employed, especially of course in horizontal relations between equals - but that an entirely novel form of it – the patronage technique – was developed to reflect a very specific type of up-and-down hierarchical<sup>215</sup> relationship.

### 3 Bureaucracy

Crossan also introduces the idea of bureaucracy, if only by saying that patronage tends to flourish when bureaucracy is weak. The notion underlying bureaucracy is *decision by rule*: the idea that instead of having to go through the arduous and time-consuming business of examining individual cases you can achieve a certain level of decision-making simply by agreeing a set of principles and then selecting and training a body of officials who can apply these. This is of course the structural aspect of decision by rule.

The great advantage of developing such a structure is that it dispenses with personal judgement and the suspicion of bias which inevitably attends it. In other words decision by rule is also a technique, one designed to provide objective decision-making, the understanding being that, once the set of rules has been decided on, their ‘blind’ application ensures that the procedure will be untainted by favouritism. Another way of highlighting the usefulness of this decision-by-rule technique is to point to out that once introduced it no longer requires the wisdom of a Solomon to achieve the ‘right’ decision since even a somewhat foolish official can be counted on to apply a simple set of rules.

Once again *decision by rule* can become coloured by a hierarchical context to produce something quite new which I term *officialdom*.<sup>216</sup> Now this body of officials sees their role as to extract the maximum revenue from the lower orders of the community and redistribute it upwards while also benefiting from it themselves. In other words, while officialdom maintains the appearance of simply offering a service to the community it in fact behaves as an extension of the ruling class. Hence the typical portrait of the ancient middle eastern official as one who can only be expected to deliver justice when adequately remunerated i.e. bribed.

The interesting thing to note is that this hierarchically coloured structure of officialdom is itself capable of being transformed by replanting it into an egalitarian political environment. This was the case, for example, at the outset of the French Revolution. Here officialdom, renamed bureaucracy, saw its purpose as being to redistribute wealth but this time downwards. At this point it is not our purpose to pass judgement regarding the direction of the redistribution but simply to note that the notions of officialdom and bureaucracy are simply decision-by-rule coloured by differing political ideas.

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<sup>215</sup> I will later dispute the use of this term for defining ancient thought-forms. However, the word will do for the present.

<sup>216</sup> I use the term *officialdom* strictly of decision-by-rule structures in hierarchical societies and *bureaucracy* strictly of decision-by-rule structures in democratic societies even though the words are interchangeable in common usage.

#### 4. Honour

Another important idea introduced by Crossan is honour. Honour is a development of the basic notion of respect: the awareness that special acknowledgement is due to those whose accomplishments are particularly valued by the community. If we see this respect as either a way of facilitating the relationships between individuals within a society (politeness) or as a way in which individuals further their interests by giving way to those who have superior skills, knowledge or experience then it would seem right to classify it as a *utilitarian* and therefore *technical* idea. However, respect is not only thought of as something freely given but also as something which is due, in which case we are dealing with socially imposed behaviour; with an insistence that certain kinds of performance merit respect simply on society's say so. As I see it, a community can only be in a position to decide what is, and is not, respectable behaviour if it manages to establish to the satisfaction of its members that the universe carries with it a certain *hidden grain*, making it more worthy of respect for people to work *with* this hidden grain rather than *against* it. In other words if it were believed that the universe was grainless, in the sense of being (metaphorically) indifferent or careless about the way in which people behave, this concept of respect would be untenable. Consequently I call this kind of respect, which cannot be accounted for in a utilitarian manner, as *existential*, thereby indicating that it essentially depends on an awareness of a hidden grain to existence; to "this game of life". (cp. Paul's "law written on men's hearts").

In an honour ideology, as depicted by Crossan, this notion of respect is coloured and transformed into something quite new, as a result of its association with a hierarchical context. Honour is not simply something you earn by personal merit but an entitlement by virtue of *the social position* accorded you. Crossan points out that honour is seen as an important motivating force in hierarchical societies, the understanding being that as one lives through the honour shown by others and by means of the self-honour this enables one to possess, and as the permanence of this honour can never be counted on, one has to re-acquire it continually by a succession of heroic actions.

In non-hierarchical respect systems the situation is normally relaxed, making it perfectly admissible for one to manifest a humorous lack of respect towards others as well as to oneself. Indeed this gauged rudeness often becomes a way of breaking down the barrier between strangers and constitutes an indirect declaration of friendship and intimacy (what the Americans call *buddiness*). In honour systems, on the contrary, the circumstances tend to become highly charged, making it all too easy for a person to misinterpret a situation: to mistake a mouthed bit of obsequiousness for a genuine compliment or a casual action for a calculated slight. Consequently, in hierarchical situations the structural aspect of honour tends to become increasingly formalised since almost anything said or done in public may be deemed to be of consequence and so needs to be controlled.

#### 5. Deity

It would seem that Crossan does not credit religion with much importance since he does not take account of any religious idea. However, in order to complete this preliminary sketch of the spectrum of notions making up the field of ideas covered by an ideology, we are obliged to do so.

One important expedient employed by the people of the ancient world was to *personify* the powers of the universe as they were experienced.<sup>217</sup> This notion of personified forces, along with its structural aspect in *myth*, made up what one might call the *deity* construct. How should we categorise the deity/myth preoccupation? Clearly it is not political since it does not *of itself* advocate that power should be distributed in any given way. The popular belief is that myths were religious stories designed to persuade people of the existence of creative powers within the universe. This, however, can hardly be so, first, because ancient men and women hardly had to be persuaded about such a thing and second, because myths were not solely associated with the organised cult but probably had just as much a place in secular settings.

However, though I would certainly grant that deity becomes an existential idea used to establish the religious nature of the hidden grain within existence, I believe we should start by seeing it as just another ordinary technique, the mythological superstructure being an invention designed to make it easier for humans to think about and discuss the natural forces within the cosmos and their relationship to them. In other words I see myth in the first instance as an ordinary linguistic device closely associated with allegory.

Both myth and allegory contain sets of symbols which stand for complex entities that are difficult to discuss in a straightforward manner. In both, the reason for this substitution is that by using symbols it is much easier to think through one's thoughts and express what one is trying to say than by trying to manipulate the complex entities themselves. In other words both myth and allegory are *representational* speech-forms that function as facilitators. The difference between them is that whereas in allegory the symbolic representations are invented on the spot, making it quite evident what the speaker is up to, in myths the basic decision to symbolise the natural forces by means of their personifications was taken so long ago that the speaker may be quite unaware that he or she is using a technique. Indeed one might speculate that the mythological superstructure emerged so gradually that there never would have been a time when people fully realised what they were doing when creating their myths. However, whether this was the case or not is of little importance. What matters is that with allegory people are generally aware they are employing a technique whereas with myths they are not - and this is as true today as it was in the past. For example how many people realise they are using representational language when they talk about the son of God?

In comparison with allegory, myths may appear a rather restricted technique since it ties the user to a fixed set of representations. However, the invention of the mythological superstructure opened such an important door for humanity, making it possible for the first time for people to discuss a crucial part of their experience with relative ease, that this more than made up for any restrictions imposed at the symbolic level. Myths can hardly be considered allegory's poor relation. If anything the boot is on the other foot.

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<sup>217</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, pp. 625, 627, 637.

Like other idea-techniques deity is strongly coloured by the political environment in which it operates. For example the Akkadian Atra-Hasis myth shows that Mesopotamian society considered deity to be, as we would say, hierarchical not simply in relation to humans and lesser creatures but *within itself*, there being two kinds of gods, a small, ruling, 'boss' clique and a much larger 'worker' group.

## 6. Creation and design

There is one fully fledged religious idea we have to look at in this preliminary survey: the notion that the universe's hidden grain was created by design. As I see it creation and design are not two ideas but aspects of the same notion, since a creation is by definition something which appears by design and not haphazardly. In other words a 'creation' signifies an object having significance, sense, or meaning. For the ancients the structural aspect of this creation/design idea was the cult. For example, in their myths the Sumerians put forward the understanding that the gods had carved out the universe to satisfy their needs and purposefully created Man to act as a priestly manager, to see to it that their daily needs were provided for in the form of temple sacrifices. We have to be a little bit careful here for though, in terms of creation, purpose clearly implies design, not all creative designs imply purpose. People often assume that the idea of creation implies that everything, including events, has a purpose but this is not the case, for though the Mesopotamians certainly believed humans beings were created for a purpose, the Hebrews, as we shall see, most certainly didn't.<sup>218</sup>

Clearly this creation/design idea belongs entirely within what I have called the existentialist register since its function is to establish the religious nature of the identified hidden grain within existence. Thus the creation/design notion, where it is present, may be said to operate as the ruling religious idea.

### *Patterning of ideas*

With this scattering of ideas pinned, as it were, to the board we should now be in a position to see how they interact and so are patterned within an ideology.

#### 1. Political colour

My first comment is that whereas ideas often affect one another it seems to be the case that political ideas (those concerned with human power and creativity) colour and transform other notions in a particularly important way. This is why political ideas are often quite rightly taken as representing the community's ideology as a whole.

#### 2. The technical and existential continuum

My second suggestion is that what we have within the ideological field, very generally, are two categories of ideas: *technical* and *existential*, both defined, as it were, against each other. Thus, technical ideas receive this categorisation essentially because they elude existential measurement, being gauged purely by efficiency - by whether they

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<sup>218</sup> See below p. 200 and pp. 305-307.

render the community's functioning easier and more productive. On the other hand existential ideas receive this categorisation because they ask to be judged by the higher criterion of the hidden grain of the universe.

As these categories are defined against each other they are clearly end-points on a continuum. In other words the distinction they represent is not absolute since to be truly efficient and productive, at least in the long run, you have to work with, rather than against, the hidden grain of the universe - whatever this hidden grain may be! That said, in our day-to-day existence we clearly find the distinction useful. To us it is manifestly apparent, for example, that the respect given to morally praiseworthy behaviour is not at all the same thing as the respect demonstrated in a mere show of politeness. However, you have to be careful because you can easily find yourself using the technical/existential distinction to hide contradictions. For example, a child may ask you why you shake the hands of people they know you dislike and you explain (or does this dodge the issue?) that you do so simply to be polite. Though it is often difficult to see such a contradiction in our own behaviour, we are sometimes made aware of it in others when, for example, the prime minister is seen shaking the hands of a terrorist. Should a government minister shake the hands of terrorists before entering into negotiations with them, we ask ourselves, or should he not rather insist that he can only do this *after* the terrorists have unequivocally renounced terrorism? Political politeness may emphatically suggest that there is no point in negotiating if one is not prepared to shake hands, whereas existential considerations may equally forcibly suggest that shaking hands can only be seen as condoning terrorism. That said, the bystander senses that should the prime minister declare "I am shaking these people's hands but only as a matter of politeness" he would be fudging the issue: hiding behind the technical/existential distinction. In such circumstances we are given the grace to see the need for consistency since respect remains respect even when it appears in the form of politeness.

The fact that we are dealing with continuums and not absolute distinctions means of course that I am unable to maintain that the deity/myth notion should *only* be seen as a technique and *never* as something overtly existential and therefore as a full blown religious idea. For even if I am right, historically, to maintain that the mythological superstructure developed initially as a linguistic device, it is clear that sooner or later people were bound to start employing it further and further towards the existential end of the continuum, which is exactly what we find in the Genesis stories.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Gerhard Von Rad calls this a spiritualising exercise. 'It is well to consider what in all probability would have happened to these [Genesis] traditions if they had not been united in a fixed literary form. Without doubt the fact that some traditions were detached from the cultic sphere meant that their content was heavily spiritualised. Nor will it be denied that this liberation from a musty and materialistic cult was a fortunate occurrence, which opened up the possibility of unsuspected development of the subject of this material. But by the same token, the traditions would be more and more subject to inner dissipation. Every such spiritualization is at the same time a dangerous process of dissolution working at the marrow of the material, for every spiritualization is also a rationalization.' Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM press Ltd, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Revised edition 1972) p. 18

### 3. The nature of the hidden grain

My third comment is that there are obvious subgroupings within the existential category, depending on the way in which the so-called hidden grain of the universe is defined.

#### a) Self interest

In the first instance this hidden grain may be no more than a thin disguise for self-interest. Such is the case, for example, in many forms of nationalism. Britons never shall be slaves not because that is what history has taught us but because that is how we like to see ourselves. In other words a community may fool itself into thinking it has established a veritable hidden grain within the universe when any outsider can see perfectly plainly that this hidden grain is nothing but a thinly disguised cloak for self glorification.

#### b) Nature

A considerable advance on this position is achieved when people actually attempt to identify a hidden grain by appealing to nature. Thus, for example, it is sometimes claimed that homosexuality is wrong because unnatural. Similarly, though with a great deal more justification, it is sometimes argued that hierarchy is a proper pattern for human society because humans are naturally hierarchical. The criticism generally levelled against this position is not simply that it has yet to be scientifically established that all primitive human societies were organised hierarchically but that it is a mistake to envisage nature in a fixed state.

#### c) Progress

One of the strengths of Marxism has been to realise the danger of considering human society in such a static way. Thus, for example, when discussing the relative merits of capitalism as over against feudalism Gottwald writes:

...Marx saw capitalist social relations as progressive only up to a certain point, namely, the point where the improvement of the forces of production was fettered by the relations of production so that the boons of the new productivity in goods, services, and ideas were restricted arbitrarily to a minority and denied or rationed to a majority, precisely when the means for their wider appropriation were technically available.<sup>220</sup>

The specific problem with this position, is the obvious difficulty in objectively defining the criteria by which one set of social relations (egalitarian) is judged to be progressive and another (hierarchical) not, since whatever theories we may have none of us is in a position to make a definitive pronouncement on such a controversial subject as the future development of human society.

There is, however, a much more serious difficulty associated with both the apparently 'right wing' aspect of nature and this supposedly 'left wing' aspect of progress. Even if we manage to satisfy ourselves that we have properly grasped how the cosmos operates, what is there to tell us that we are right to make it, either in its 'right wing' nature or its 'left wing' progress mode, the standard by which we rule our lives, since doing so inevitably ties us into a determinism which makes nonsense of human will and achievement. What foolishness to risk life and limb for a cause which is probably

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<sup>220</sup> Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 20.



before its time, and which in any case will finally fulfil itself when its time comes, whether one participates or not!

We shall now turn to the biblical position which I believe attempts to deal with this difficulty, though of course in its ancient rather than modern formulation. However, before doing so I want to make it clear that the two positions above, in which the hidden grain is defined according to a perceived awareness of how the universe operates – in terms either of its static nature or of its dynamic development – are what I call ‘cosmic’ positions.<sup>221</sup>

#### 4. The metacosmic wager

Though I have emphasised the *problematic* nature of the hidden grain it has in truth always been clear to human beings that the universe exhibits an obvious bias against weakness and in favour of strength (understood in modern science as unfitness and fitness).<sup>222</sup> Indeed the rulers of the ancient Near East constantly used this bias to justify their rule. Thus they proclaimed the Mesopotamian hero Sargon to be the favoured of the gods *because of his strength*, and when Sargon’s empire collapsed soon after his death they proclaimed it to be *because of the hero’s hidden weakness*.<sup>223</sup> Darwin gave this bias a theoretical basis in his dictum: *the survival of the fittest*. However, the fact is that humanity did not have to wait for the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* to become aware of this reality – it being understood that I speak here of the bias alone and not of the evolutionary process, of which of course ancient people were completely unaware.

It might be supposed that this natural bias in favour of strength would cause creatures within the cosmos to be uniquely concerned with their own survival, thus precluding all possibility of natural altruistic behaviour. This however is evidently not the case, a fact of life which caused Darwin a bit of a problem ... until he realised that altruism, though possibly harmful to the individual could enhance the survival of the group to which it belonged. Such a natural or cosmic altruism is found built into ancient Near Eastern hierarchical societies. For example among the laws of Hammurabi is found an acknowledgement of his obligation to defend the interests of the weak (the widow and the orphan):

The great gods called me,  
so I became the beneficent shepherd whose scepter is righteous;  
my benign shadow is spread over my city.  
In my bosom I carried the peoples of the land of Sumer and Akad;  
they prospered under my protection;  
I always governed them in peace;  
I sheltered them in my wisdom.  
In order that the strong might not oppress the weak  
that justice might be dealt the orphan and the widow, ...  
I wrote my precious words on my stela, ...

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<sup>221</sup> The New Testament, for its part, uses the expression ‘this world’ as opposed to ‘the kingdom of God’ (or ‘heaven’) which in my vocabulary is the ‘metacosmic’ position.

<sup>222</sup> See p. 64 above.

<sup>223</sup> His sacrilege in destroying Babylon. See *Ancient Near Eastern Text Relating to the Old Testament*, Edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1969) p. 266.

To give justice to the oppressed.<sup>224</sup>

Such altruistic laws were clearly designed to prevent blameless individuals who had suffered accidents of fate and as a result were unable to defend themselves, from going under, thus weakening the community as a whole. It cannot be emphasised enough that such displays of group altruism are perfectly in accord with the cosmic bias in favour of strength and as such are quite distinct from metacosmic altruism.

In this regard it is important to recognise that hierarchical societies like our own, which are fundamentally committed to the idea that well-being comes through strength, contain two distinct groups of people typified as weak. First there is the most vulnerable section of the community: those at the bottom often called ‘the poor’. These are the people Hammurabi includes under his ‘widow and orphan’ rubric. If you are responsible for running a community and if you recognise the importance of keeping such people on board it is natural that you will think of them as being worthy of some attention. In this way they are thought of as ‘the worthy poor’ as distinct from the second group: the people for whom hierarchical society has no time or use; people whom it excludes and confines to the dust-bin. Such people tend to congregate on the fringes of the community or even outside of it altogether, even while receiving the names by which they are known from those who have rejected them. Such labels characteristically saddle the people themselves with the responsibility for their predicament. Today we call them drop-outs, no-users, criminals or hippies etc. In the ancient Near East they were called ‘Apiru dogs’,<sup>225</sup> ‘Apiru being a term etymologically identical with the biblical Hebrew.’<sup>226</sup> In the New Testament they are either described as ‘the destitute’ or else labelled ‘collaborators (tax-gatherers) and sinners’. Jesus, for his part, in speaking of his followers used the term ‘the little ones’. In this way he signified that they were the ‘party’ whose interests he had made his own. In this book such people go under the fairly neutral heading of marginals – though it has to be admitted that any name coming from a citizen of a hierarchical society, such as myself, will tend to sound derogatory.

Now whereas the worthy poor can expect to benefit, at least to a degree,<sup>227</sup> from this cosmic altruism, marginals can expect from hierarchical society only contemptuous disregard. This being the case it is hardly surprising that when, at a crucial moment in human history, a group of such people experienced a dynamic hope they based it on something other than a cosmic awareness. Indeed the only way for such marginals to make terms with the blind, amoral and uncaring, survival-of-the-fittest cosmos witnessed to by the cosmic deities, was to circumvent it and them by placing their bets on a *metacosmic* deity.

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<sup>224</sup> ANET, p. 178

<sup>225</sup> ‘We know what the establishment view of the ‘*apiru* was. They were *kalbu halqu* (EA 67:17), a “stray dog”: off the leash, belonging to no master, posing a danger to all, despicable. They were social riffraff. Walsh, *Mighty*, p. 38

<sup>226</sup> This does not mean that the names are interchangeable and that all ‘Apiru were Hebrews. It means simply that those the Bible calls Hebrews were the same kind of people the Egyptians habitually referred to as ‘Apiru dogs.

<sup>227</sup> A very small degree one suspects, in the case of ancient Near Eastern societies.

Since this is a crucial point let me briefly describe this monumental ideological breakthrough achieved by the revolutionary Hebrews as clearly as I can. Any group within human society is experienced both by those within it and those outside of it as a manifestation of human force and creativity. Since they lacked our extensive political vocabulary the people of the ancient world chose to speak about this phenomenon of group vitality by personalising it, representing it in their talk as the group's spirit or god. Evidently therefore, everyone in the ancient Near East would have been perfectly willing to recognise that the Hebrews, like all human groups, had a god. However, given the fact that in the eyes of civilisation the Hebrews were a worthless bunch of no-users their god Yahweh would have been seen as the smallest and most insignificant of the deities, so insignificant indeed that calling him a god would have been taken by the Hebrews as a slight. It is easy to understand that the Hebrews could have none of this but what were they to do? The answer is shatteringly obvious. Since there was no way they could endure to have their god placed alongside all of the other gods *in the cosmic scheme* they naturally decided to envisage him as existing *altogether out-with*<sup>228</sup> *it*. But how was this idea to be expressed? Since we are only too familiar with the concept of a God who created the universe *ex nihilo* we would have expected them to have achieved their object by making Yahweh both exterior to and prior to the universe. However, that would be expecting too much at this early stage of development. The move they made certainly culminated in the ex-nihilo, monotheistic concept but the ideological breakthrough itself was considerably more subtle. Since characteristically all of the cosmic gods were portrayed as experiencing appetites and needs the Hebrews portrayed their god Yahweh as altogether beyond such things. In this way, as a hope against hope, the idea of the metacosmic god was born.<sup>229</sup>

### *Summary*

Our examination of the ideological scene indicates that an ideology is an assemblage of notions crucially controlled by two leading ideas, both residing in the upper, existential register. These leading ideas together operate to determine the values adhered to by those adopting the ideology. The first is the ruling religious idea. This, in itself a relatively unimportant notion, simply defines the model which is being used to handle the 'hidden grain phenomenon'.<sup>230</sup> The second is the ruling political idea which defines the basic way in which it is believed that human power and creativity should be organized and exploited. This absolutely crucial idea indelibly 'colours' all the other notions in the ideology and is sometimes quite properly seen as representing the tendency of the ideology as a whole.

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<sup>228</sup> 'Out-with' being my way of trying to avoid special or temporal words associated with the idea of *ex nihilo* creation.

<sup>229</sup> For more on the Metacosmic god see Chapter 10 below.

<sup>230</sup> The choice for us would appear to be between two types of model: theistic and atheistic. In the past most human beings had no choice. Today, as a result of the development of analytical thought, we have. This is not to suggest that theism is an out-of-date technology, it is simply to recognise that atheism, as an alternative model, has arisen as a result of analytical thinking. My own view is that an entrenched atheistic position proves to be as untenable as an entrenched theistic one. It is necessary, I believe, to live uncomfortably between the two, with some leaning perhaps more to one side and some more to the other, but neither dragging the duvet completely onto their side of the bed!



## Chapter 5.

### **The Ideological Scene in the Ancient Near East**

What emerged very clearly in the last chapter was the critical roles played by the ruling political and religious ideas in any ideology – the former in colouring all the other existential ideas<sup>231</sup> and the latter in setting their parameters.<sup>232</sup> Bearing this in mind we will now turn to examine the ideological scene in the Ancient Near East.

#### *The Ruling Political Idea in Ancient Near Eastern Civilisations*

##### *Language and techniques designed to aid expression*

As already noted, though we may be certain that the people of the ancient Near East had political ideas<sup>233</sup> and used them freely in their discussions, they clearly had not as yet developed a vocabulary of abstract generalisations such as is available to us now, to facilitate their expression. It would seem that their technique was to employ imaginative, symbolic representations to mark out the patterns they discovered in the concrete situations they contemplated.<sup>234</sup> In this way they were able to deliberate on the character of these concrete situations without obscuring them – something which tends to happen with our own abstractions. There was also a bonus in that such symbolic representations were much easier for people to grasp and remember than straight descriptions of the situations under discussion.<sup>235</sup>

##### Allegories

One of the representational technique used in the ancient world for talking politics was allegory. For example the prophet Ezekiel, pondering on Israel's political predicament, offered his hearers a memorable little story about an abandoned new-born female child miraculously rescued from death by a passing stranger.<sup>236</sup>

##### Myths

Even more than by allegories the people of the ancient Near East expressed their political ideas in myths. In my understanding<sup>237</sup> a myth is essentially an allegorical story in which the symbolic representations are standardised, experienced cosmic forces

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<sup>231</sup> By determining the way in which the power question is resolved.

<sup>232</sup> By determining whether the universe has a purpose outside of itself or not.

<sup>233</sup> That is to say ideas about the proper way in which power and creativity should be exercised within human society.

<sup>234</sup> Our own abstract generalisations are patternings of a different kind but designed for the same purpose.

<sup>235</sup> Compare, for example, Ez 17.1-10 with Ez 17.11-21.

<sup>236</sup> Ez 16.

<sup>237</sup> See above pp. 64-5 and also my work *Painfully Clear: The Parables of Jesus*, (Sheffield: SAP, 1996) p. 33-37

being represented by traditional supernatural personages. If my understanding is correct this mythological technology is basically just a facilitating device for contemplating and discussing otherwise unmanageable ideological subject matters.<sup>238</sup> This would mean that people who nowadays understand the first few chapters of Genesis either as specially bequeathed spiritual revelations (e.g. the creationists) or alternatively as worthless primitive science and superstitious nonsense (e.g. Richard Dawkins) are both equally wide of the mark.

### Superstition

But why have such commonly held views come about? Well, typically, myths operate as ideological assertions, each story being designed to substantiate some particular dogma. As such they constitute faith statements. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong in this since everyone has the right to make up his or her own mind about the character of the universe – its hidden grain as we have called it – given both that it is not a matter which is intrinsically verifiable and that irrefutably the world looks quite different when viewed from different perspectives.<sup>239</sup> So the problem with myths does not lie in that they are dogmatic but in that they are constituted from traditional symbolic representations of long standing. This fact makes it all too easy for people inadvertently to slip into the habit of endowing these traditional symbols themselves with a quite spurious reality so that they eventually take on a life of their own. In this way, for example, Adapa, who presumably started off in the imagination of some Sumerian myth-maker as no more than a convenient symbol for all of humankind, always ran a risk of becoming hypostatized into the first historical man who ever lived; a true personage who only represented mankind because he was the first actual man. This slippage, of course, is something that would probably never have happened if myth-makers had been forced to invent new symbolic representations for every myth they told, as is generally the case with allegories. For example, in Ezekiel's story of the abandoned female baby there was never much chance of Israel being hypostatized into that child or of Yahweh being hypostatized into that passer-by. This hypostatizing which, at least as I see it, claims more than what the actual myth-maker was effectively claiming, is the cause of all the problems and explains why people tend to go over the top in either exalting a myth as a special revelation or decrying it as a bit of primitive scientific rubbish.

In the case of any particular example of myth-making it is, of course, very difficult to know just how little or how much hypostatizing was present in the mind of the myth-maker him or herself. However, given the fact that the Genesis Adam myths are clearly a challenging ideological rewriting of the Mesopotamian Adapa stories I am pretty certain that the writer of the Adam stories knew what he was doing and did not for one moment believe that he was writing the biography of the first human being. What his readers thought, on the other hand, is difficult to say since we do not know anything about them. That said, my own feeling is that ancient people probably treated myths with a great deal more sophistication and awareness of the technology than most of us nowadays suspect.

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<sup>238</sup> Religious and psychological as well as political.

<sup>239</sup> Which is why it is spoken of as 'hidden'.

## Myth: a concrete example

As it will be easier to discuss the ruling political idea in the ancient Near East on the basis of something concrete, here is my paraphrasing of the opening of the Akkadian Atra-Hasis myth:

Long ago when they were creating the universe (i.e. Mesopotamia) it was the gods who had to do all the work and suffer toil like people do today. The labour was heavy and their distress considerable. It was the seven great gods (the Annunaki) who made the other lesser gods (the Igigi) do all the hard manual work. An, their father, was king; Enlil, the warrior, their councillor; Ninurta was their works supervisor and Ennugi their chief constable. These had come to an agreement about sharing the management tasks by drawing lots. An retired up into heaven, leaving the earth to his subjects and to prince Enki (the administrator god of fresh water) fell the responsibility of guarding the bolt of the door that held back the sea.

The other gods set about their work – digging the rivers, building the mountains and forming the marshes. For forty years they suffered this work, night and day, but there was a lot of backbiting and grumbling on the work sites. In the end a revolt broke out. ‘Let us go and confront the works supervisor and get him to relieve us of this heavy labour’, one of them said. ‘Come on, let’s shame Enlil by tackling him at his house’, said another. ‘Take up hostilities’, ‘Declare War’, ‘The battle commences’, they all shouted.

They set fire to their wooden tools and held them aloft as they went to the door of Enlil’s shrine. It was midnight and halfway through the watch. The temple was surrounded before Enlil became aware of it. Kalak (Enlil’s doorman) saw what was happening and was terrified. He slid the door bolt back and took a look. Then he woke up Nusku (Enlil’s butler) and they both listened to the noise. Finally Nusku woke his lordship and got him out of his bed. ‘My Lord, your temple is surrounded and the rabble has advanced right up to the main entrance’, he whispered urgently. ‘Quickly, barricade the door’, shouted Enlil ‘then grab your weapon and stand in front of me!’ ‘My lord are you afraid of your own sons?’, Nusku said reproachfully. ‘Send and fetch An down and have Enki brought into your presence’. So Enlil had An and Enki fetched in and in the presence of the Anunnaki poured out his woes. ‘Do you think this rebellion is directed against me personally? How can I fight against my own family? O dear, I have seen with my very own eyes this rabble which has come right to my front door!’

‘Let Nusku go and find out why all the gods have surrounded your house’, advised An. So Enlil sent Nusku to the door, armed with his weapon, with a message for those gathered outside. On emerging, Nusku bowed to all the gods and repeated Enki’s message. ‘An, Enlil, Ninurta and Ennugi have sent me to ask who has instigated this conflict. Who has provoked these hostile scenes?’ The reply he got was unequivocal ‘All of us gods are responsible for this action. We are all being murdered by excessive toil. Because our work is so heavy we are in great distress. As a result every one of us has opted for confrontation with Enlil.’

When Enlil heard this he burst into tears and clutched An’s arm. ‘Noble one’, he said, ‘Now’s the time to exercise your heavenly authority. While the gods are gathered together here call one of them in and have him executed!’ ‘But what are we accusing them of?’, replied An. ‘It’s true that their work is heavy and distressing. Every day we could hear their heavy wailings’. Enki now intervened. ‘I see that Nintu, the goddess of birth, is here. Let us ask her to create man so that he can bear the yolk and carry out this labour for the gods.’

So Nintu (known as Mami) the wise midwife of the gods, was asked to step forward. ‘As you are the goddess of birth why don’t you create man so that he can do the gods’ work’, asked Enlil. ‘I cannot just create things out of nothing’, objected Nintu. ‘Enki is skilled in cleansing everything. Let him get me some material to work on.’ ‘We will have to sacrifice one of the gods for the sake of the others’, decided Enki. ‘Nintu must make a mix of clay and god’s flesh in which god and man are thoroughly worked together. A live spirit will be generated from this god’s flesh and we will hear the drum that announces that the time for rest has come at last.’

In the assembly they slayed the god Weila, who had personality. Nintu mixed clay from his flesh and blood and all the gods spat on the clay. When Nintu had completed the job she announced triumphantly 'There! You gave me a job to do and I have done it. I have removed your heavy labour. I have imposed your toil upon man. You have slaughtered a god together with his personality and I have loosed your yoke, I have established freedom.' On hearing this all the gods rushed to kiss her feet. 'Before we used to call you Mami the wise. Now we name you 'Mistress of all the gods!'.<sup>240</sup>

### *Was the ruling political idea hierarchy?*

Almost all commentators describe the political ideologies of the ancient Near East as *hierarchical* and, looking at this myth (which is eminently typical), one can well understand why. We all find the general scenario very familiar, instantly recognising the same hierarchical organisation as that which operates in our own society and workplace situations. Because of this it may well raise eyebrows if I suggest that in fact *hierarchical* is a very misleading term to use in characterising Near Eastern ideology. Etymologically, hierarchy means 'rule by priests' and in this respect the word is quite appropriate to the ancient Near East since in most successful military take-overs the new rulers were quick to buttress their positions by installing themselves as chief priests as soon as they decently could.<sup>241</sup> However, in this case etymology is misleading since today we never use the word hierarchy in this sense. For us hierarchy means the rule of those high up: people Glaswegians call high-hegions. The word instantly brings to mind the picture of a pyramidal society, with the mass of the people at the bottom conceding power to the handful at the top. What I am suggesting is that this picture of society was not shared by the people of the ancient Near East.

### *The ruling political idea as centrarchy.*

The way in which the military chiefs who controlled the great civilisations of the Ancient Near East portrayed themselves was not as *the pinnacle* of creation but as *the centre* of creation. They saw themselves as the source of a beneficial order which spread out from the royal palace to the farthest extremities of the world.<sup>242</sup> In other words the model they worked with was not a pyramid of power but a huge central hub which radiated power outwards amongst a surrounding, undifferentiated mass so that those happy enough to be closest to the centre were blessed by its proximity while those further away were to be pitied for their increasingly powerless condition.

We can see this centrarchical framework in operation in the Sumerian myth entitled: *Enki and the World Order*. After an introductory passage, a hymn by Enki the great administrator-god of wisdom and order in praise of himself, we enter the first section

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<sup>240</sup> For the original see W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969) p. 43-61

<sup>241</sup> 'It seems quite clear that the nobility of the Late Bronze Age is usually the military aristocracy and the civil bureaucracy (whose economic affluence is due to their proximity to the source of power), and both constitute the priesthood as well.' Mendenhall. *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press Ltd. 1973) p. 24

<sup>242</sup> It was the French biblicist Jean Alexandre who brought this fact to my attention.



which deals with Enki's grand benediction of the geo-political world order.<sup>243</sup> The section begins with Enki blessing Sumer – i.e. the recognised world – and its king:

Sumer, great mountain, country of the universe filled with enduring light, dispensing from sunrise to sunset the Mes (the principles of order) to the people. Your lord is an honoured lord, he sits with king An on An's dais. Your king, the great mountain, father Enlil, has made him for you like a cedar, the father of all the lands. The Anunaki, the great gods, have taken up their dwelling in your midst. Sumer, may your many stalls be built, may your cows multiply. May your many sheepfolds be erected, may your sheep be myriad etc.<sup>244</sup>

From then on Enki makes a pilgrimage throughout the world dispensing blessings, starting at Sumer's most famous city of Ur and moving on from there to Meluhha and Dilmun, which seem to have been the places from which the Sumerians believed their ancestors came, and then on to the centres of Sumer's enemies Elam and Marashi, the mountain people to the north, where Enki's blessings turn into a curse, and finally to Martu, the wild nomadic peoples on the western steppelands:

To him who builds no cities, builds no houses, the Martu - Enki presented cattle as a gift.<sup>245</sup>

### *Centrarchy as a flattering fiction*

The centrarchical understanding witnessed-to in this myth was, of course, based on a blatant fiction which on certain occasions would have been difficult to maintain, for every empire is made painfully aware, from time to time, of the existence of *competing* powers within its orbit, as can be seen in the curses on Elam and Marashi above.

However, ingenious pretences were invented to deal with such contradictions. As far as was possible empires simply ignored each other: their functionaries treating foreigners who presumed to stray into their vicinity as subhuman, for instance refusing even to eat at the same table with them.<sup>246</sup> When this was not possible and two empires came to blows, either one would destroy the other and absorb what remained into vassaldom, thus getting rid of the contradiction of a world with two centres, or else a treaty would be drawn up making each empire the vassal of the other. By this simple expedient the fiction – of their one and only central position within creation – was conveniently maintained since each warring king could return to his own people with a signed document declaring that the opposing power had agreed to come under his sphere of influence.<sup>247</sup>

### *Centrarchy and the creation of excluded marginals*

It is, of course, perfectly true that this centrarchical understanding looks pretty similar to our hierarchical one. The power distribution in both is grossly uneven – either between top and bottom or between the centre and surroundings. However, there is one important difference: whereas the hierarchical pattern with its layered classes concentrates on oppositions between classes *within a system*, the central pattern

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<sup>243</sup> The second and mid-section deals with Enki's organisation of Sumer's natural environment and the third and final section with his establishment of Sumer's economic structures.

<sup>244</sup> S.N. Kramer *The Sumerians* ( Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976) p.171f

<sup>245</sup> Kramer, *Sumerians*, p.179

<sup>246</sup> e.g. Gen 43.32

<sup>247</sup> As happened in the treaty between Ramsees II and Hattusilis III, at least on the Egyptian side. See Pritchard, *ANET* pp. 199-203

concentrates either on conflicts at the centre – to determine who is to be king – or on conflicts *between the system itself and those excluded: the outsiders or marginals*. Of course the people at the centre would have denied that any *human* was excluded from their orbit since they saw their empire's influence as without limits – which of course is why they tended to talk of marginals as subhumans or dogs.<sup>248</sup> This comforting fiction was fine for those safely ensconced at the heart of the capital city but its fragility could become all too apparent when the call of duty had taken them off to some far-flung outpost of the empire. This is clear from a letter sent by the Egyptian 'governor' Abdu-Heba in Jerusalem, back to his boss the Pharaoh:

.... Let my king take thought for his land! This land of the king is lost; in its entirety it is taken from me; there is war against me, as far as the land of Seir (and) as far as Gath-carmel! All the governors are at peace, but there is war against me. I have become like an 'Apiru and do not see the two eyes of the king, my Lord, for there is war against me. I have become like a ship in the midst of the sea! ...<sup>249</sup>

One senses Abdu-Heba's terror of losing touch with his centre;<sup>250</sup> his horror at the proximity of the non-human force of 'apiru marginals.

### *Marginals and fringe-dwellers*

It is important to bear in mind that these 'apiru marginals were by no means originally fringe-dwellers.<sup>251</sup> The interface between the two worlds of humans and marginals was not at a fixed periphery but was something altogether more interpenetrating. In fact a marginal could be someone originating within the palace itself.<sup>252</sup> In other words marginals were everywhere yet nowhere, for people within the system would naturally be loath to recognize their presence. This being so the 'apiru would naturally tend to migrate towards the fringes of the empire since only there could they find the freedom to express their humanity.

### *Summary*

Let me now summarise this central ideology. The centrarch sees his or her situation as the interplay of two very unequal yet conflicting worlds. First there is his or her own world drawn together at its heart into a proud and comforting mass. Surrounding and interpenetrating this is a second world of distressing marginality. The first world represents order, culture and civilisation and is inhabited by god-fearing men and women. The second world represents chaos, culturelessness, barbarism and is inhabited

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<sup>248</sup> See EA 91.35. 'Why do you remain silent while the 'apiru, the dog, takes your cities?' J. P. M. Walsh, *Mighty* p. 35.

<sup>249</sup> Prichard, *ANET*, pp. 488-89

<sup>250</sup> D.B. Redford claims that Abdu-Heba was not in fact an Egyptian but the son of a chief who had been dispatched to Egypt and given military training there: Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, (Princeton, New Jersey: PUP, 1992) p.270. However, this in no way effects the point I am making.

<sup>251</sup> According to Wilhelm Spiegelberg, the German Egyptologist writing in 1907, the term 'apiru was most properly applied to nomads who lived on the fringe of the Syrian desert (including the Proto-Israelites). See Lemche's article on Habiru, Hapiru in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol III* (New York: Doubleday 1992) p. 7.

<sup>252</sup> See, for example, the story of king Idrimi who on fleeing as palace coup goes to live with the 'apiru in their mountain retreat.

by marginals, atheistic ‘dogs’. It has to be emphasised that the opposition we are dealing with here is not the up-front rational competition between alternative centrarchal powers for control of the created order, but rather a fearfully irrational conflict. On the one side there are the godly creative forces which carved out the universe and installed Man (Adapa/Adam) in charge at its centre and on the other side there are the ungodly, dehumanising forces that constantly risk subverting it. I describe this second conflict as irrational because, of course, the marginals were not natural competitors and geo-political rivals of the centrarchs but rather their unwanted offspring, an inverse structural and ideological reality they and their society unwittingly begat.

### *The Ruling Religious Idea in Ancient Near-Eastern Civilisations*

#### *Cosmic deities having needs who sustain the universe*

It goes without saying that deity in the form of the mythological superstructure was the basic, existential building block of all the religious ideas in the ancient Near East. Further to this the numerous stories concerning the building of the universe and the creation of Man make it evident that the idea of bringing the world into being and sustaining it in existence was also a crucial religious notion. However, a glance at the opening of the Atra-Hasis story, paraphrased above, or any of the other creation myths from the ancient world, including those in the Bible, shows that the notion of creation *ex nihilo* was never a feature of ancient Near Eastern mythology. The cosmos was always conceived as a pre-existing, chaotic waste from which the universe was fashioned with great labour. It is characteristic of the Mesopotamian myths that the deities who undertook this enterprise were conceived of as existing residents.<sup>253</sup> They were therefore cosmic deities and, as such, not above the condition of dependants, having appetites and needs. If they created Man it was in order that He should perform the onerous job of seeing that such appetites and needs were properly satisfied, as can be seen in this rather fragmentary Sumerian creation myth:

In those remote times the gods themselves had to work for a living. All the gods had to use the sickle, the pickaxe, and the other agricultural implements; to dig canals; and generally to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. And they hated it. The very wise one, he of broad understanding, Enki, lay asleep in slumber upon his couch without ever rising from it. To him the gods turned in their misery; and his mother Nammu, the goddess of the watery deep, took their complaint before her sleeping son. Nor did she go in vain. Enki ordered Nammu to get all in readiness to give birth to “the clay that is over the *apsu*.” ... This clay was to be severed from Nammu as one severs a human infant from its mother. ... In this fashion, we must assume, the clay above the *apsu* was born, and from it man was fashioned.<sup>254</sup>

#### *Deities who represent both natural and economic forces*

Of course in the Mesopotamian myths we do not see these ‘deity’ and ‘creation’ ideas in a pure state since they have been indelibly coloured by the powerful centrarchal

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<sup>253</sup> Though the Atra-Hasis myth speaks of An climbing back up into *heaven* this is conceived of as a material place within the cosmos and not as a vague metacosmic location. The Mesopotamians saw themselves as living in a three-tiered universe consisting of the sky, the earth, and the abyss; and heaven was simply the highest tier.

<sup>254</sup> T. Jacobsen, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) p.162

notion that we have already discussed. Thus the deities we encounter in them are the representatives not only of the natural powers like earth, sea, sun, moon, winds and fresh water etc. but also of the hierarchy of human economic forces within the centrarchal system, the system itself being epitomised as a supreme father of the gods. The multitude of economic subdivisions – right the way through to the nomadic fringe-dwellers – were represented by their own specific gods. Then again, the benefits of the creating and sustaining forces are not depicted as made available graciously and democratically to all and sundry, but as vested in the king to be distributed throughout the centrarchal system by his officials.<sup>255</sup> These same officials are responsible for gathering in the fruit of human labour on behalf of the king who then makes a great pretence of delivering it all to the gods to satisfy their needs. It was ‘some system’, as Mendenhall remarked!<sup>256</sup>

### *But What About The Marginals?*

If this was the ideological world view of the ancient Near Eastern civilisations one can't help wondering how the other side – the marginals – saw things. We are up against a major difficulty here because, of course, these marginals were not in the habit of writing texts containing their thoughts and leaving them in a safe place for the benefit of posterity!<sup>257</sup> We only know what we do of the ideology of the civilisations because they commonly destroyed each other's cities, thereby sometimes unintentionally preserving the palace archives of their enemies buried beneath the rubble. We do however have traces of some marginals, if not their thoughts, in these same archives.

### *The 'Apiru*

The 'Apiru are mentioned in these texts from about 1900 BC onwards, amongst a variety of other foot-loose peoples.<sup>258</sup> What was distinctive about these people in the first part of the 18th century BC was that, though they operated in raiding parties alongside other nomadic fringe-dwellers, they differed radically from these in their mixed cultural composition. It would appear, judging by their names, that they

<sup>255</sup> The first man, Adapa, is not your ordinary bloke but a priestly administrator.

<sup>256</sup> 'The old paganism proclaimed that the supremely important factor in human history, the source of all security and economic well-being for the common run of humanity, is the power of the political state which manifests in clearest form the nature and being of the gods.' '... no political power seems to have had any concept of an ideology other than that of the divine delegation of power to the king. The king owned all the productive resources of the kingdom; he exercised the monopoly of force through a complex bureaucracy and an effective professional military group, both of whom made up the aristocracy. Mendenhall, *Tenth*, pp. 65 & 222

<sup>257</sup> 'Social movements like that of the 'apiru in Canaan do not erect monumental stela.' Walsh, *Mighty*, p. 42

<sup>258</sup> The following summary of our knowledge of the 'apiru in the 2<sup>nd</sup>. millennium BCE is based mainly on the work of M. Greenberg, *The Hab/piru*, (New Haven: 1955) p. 85-96; M.B. Rowton, *The Topological Factor in the Hapiru Problem*, Studies in Honour of Benno Landsberger, (Chicago Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1965) pp 375-387; R. de Vaux *The Early History of Israel Vol 1* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd. 1971) p. 105-12; and N. P. Lemche's article on Habiru/Hapiru in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol III* (New York: Doubleday 1992) pp. 7-9.

consisted for the most part of people of city-dwelling origin, though they also seem to have recruited their membership from the fringe-dwellers surrounding the newly settled agricultural populations in Mesopotamia. They made their living partly through pillage and raiding and partly through hiring themselves out to the local powers as mercenary bands.

It is not until two centuries later that we come across traces of 'Apiru again, though now, as if to make up for it, we find them operating in many different areas. In Egypt they appear as foreign prisoners working in forced labour camps, though still managing to guard their identity over against other prisoners and indigenous slaves. In Syria-Palestine they appear as warriors attached to certain nobles, or as independent bands living off brigandry. In northern Syria they are found as groups living as nomads and operating on the fringes of the urban states, yet having as their base camps the central mountain zones.

During the second millennium BCE these mountainous regions, from the Zagros range in Chaldea right through to Edom in southern Palestine, were heavily wooded. As far south as the Lebanon such forests were well known for their conifers, cedars and cypresses. Further south they consisted mostly of oaks, and the vegetation as a whole made up an impenetrable *maquis*. The conifer forests had already been depleted during the third millennium BCE by expeditions sent by Mesopotamian and Egyptian princes in search of building materials for their architectural projects. During the same period, the appearance of numerous small towns in Palestine meant that some of the *maquis* woodlands had begun to be cleared for grazing as well as agriculture, where the soil was good and the forests easily cut back.

Through such inroads made by human endeavour, these forest began to be sprinkled with grassy bush-clearings dotted with trees and thickets, making up a region of excellent grazing, fruit gathering and hunting. This was particularly the case in the mountain country of the west bank of the Jordan about the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Here certain areas were also put under cultivation by means of the process of terracing. It was only much later, after successive periods of political breakdown during which these terracings were left unattended, that the savage annual downpours eventually eroded the precious soil, leaving the land in the barren state that we know today.

The population of these mountain regions possessed a great diversity of resources and natural products: building wood, firewood, honey, fruit, edible beans, acorns, etc., as well as providing excellent hunting grounds and grazing facilities. They constituted, therefore, a self-sufficient economic zone capable of defence, against both the mercenary armies of the city dwellers in the plains and the raiding parties of nomads from the steppelands and deserts. It is not surprising therefore that these zones became centres of refuge and that we now find 'apiru inhabiting them and playing host to people on the run from the cities. For example, in a monumental text which dates back at least to the thirteenth century we learn of a certain Idrimi, king of Alalah, who had

fled there after he had been deposed from his throne in a palace coup.<sup>259</sup> He himself describes how he encountered a fair number of refugees who had originally come from other cities in his own land. Once Idrimi had recovered his throne with the help of the 'Apiru, he made particular efforts to settle the nomads living in his area, and it seems fairly probable that he rewarded his 'apiru helpers by attaching them in some way to his court. In any case, we hear of them a few decades later in the royal archives, where they are listed as mercenaries attached to the palace by special contracts.<sup>260</sup>

In the Hittite empire in Asia Minor, we again hear of the 'Apiru as soldiers to the court. Finally, in the Hurrite empire of the Mittani, in the town of Nuzi, east of the Tigris, we encounter the 'Apiru as miserable foot-loose foreigners prepared to sell themselves as slaves to the city-dwellers, merely to procure the right to a recognised social status.

From what we know therefore it would seem that the term 'apiru was used by the city-dwelling centrarchs, throughout the ancient Near East during the second millennium BCE,<sup>261</sup> to denote groups of foreigners who were either operating against them as outlaws from external base camps or who had been brought to heel – as mercenaries, forced labourers, or slaves.<sup>262</sup> However, unlike the other fringe-dwelling 'peoples' mentioned in the centrarchs' correspondence these 'Apiru were not an identifiable ethnic group of transhumance pastoralists or nomadic traders, but consisted of individuals from very diverse<sup>263</sup> often urban backgrounds.<sup>264</sup> What is more they were clearly highly mobile,<sup>265</sup> yet ever present, since traces of them are found in almost every part of the ancient Near East and over a wide band of time.<sup>266</sup> All of this,

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<sup>259</sup> Sidney Smith, *The Statue of Idrimi*, (London: The British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara, 1949). See also Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 557-8

<sup>260</sup> Some scholars argue that we cannot accept texts such as this at face value since they probably constitute literary rather than historical traditions (see, for example, Thompson *Bible*, p 12). However, even as literary traditions such texts can be taken as evidence of the sort of conditions pertaining in the region at that time including the presence of 'Apiru people and their style of living.

<sup>261</sup> 'The total number of occurrences of the word *habiru/hapiru* in the ANE documents is today just above 250. Practically all examples belong to the 2d millennium B.C. although there are certain indications that the expression was not totally unknown before that date. The latest occurrences are from Egyptian sources (from the reign of Rameses IV, ca. 1166-1160 B.C.) although a few literary texts from the 1st millennium mention the *habiru/hapiru*. As a social and political force the *habiru* seem to have disappeared just before the end of the 2d millennium B.C.' Lemche, *Dictionary*, p. 7.

<sup>262</sup> 'During the following era, the Old Babylonian period, the *habirulhapiru* are mentioned more often. There is some indication of these people being employed as mercenaries in the pay of the state administration, whereas in the archival reports from the royal palace of Mari we are confronted with the first known examples of *habiru/hapiru* as outlaws or brigands.' Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 7.

<sup>263</sup> 'the available evidence shows that a variety of ethnic groups could be listed under this heading in any society of that time' Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 7.

<sup>264</sup> See Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 401. While agreeing that the 'Apiru were not members of the local population de Vaux argues against the trend that they were a people rather than a class of fugitives (*Early History*, p. 111-12). He does this first because the name 'Apiru endured for a long period of time (nearly a thousand years) and was used over a wide geographic area and, second, because the 'Apiru were known to have their own gods. However, I believe these facts are no less compatible with an ostracised social class than with a racial group of people. See Gottwald, 'De Vaux's personal conclusion that 'apiru was, after all, an ethnic designation is scarcely any longer tenable.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, n. 311 p. 759.

<sup>265</sup> 'The documents from Mari and elsewhere also show that the *habiru/hapiru* were considered a highly mobile population element.' Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 7.

<sup>266</sup> de Vaux *Early History*, p. 214.

coupled with the name itself which would appear to signify either 'outlaw'<sup>267</sup> or alternatively 'dust,'<sup>268</sup> suggests that these 'apiru people were different from everyone else in that as excrescences and rejects they were a creation of the centrarchal system itself. Let me give a few general instances to illustrate the point.

- Younger sons

In centrarchal society the position of younger sons was always precarious especially in the higher, or perhaps one should say more central echelons of society. For most families it was a question of economics for since wealth created more wealth it was counterproductive to split up the family fortune on the death of the father. This meant that the tendency was for younger sons, in one way or another, to lose out. For the royal family the position of younger sons was even more vulnerable since they were inevitably seen as competitors for the throne. In view of all these factors one would expect to find a considerable number of younger sons amongst the marginals.

- Merchants

One curious consequence of the centrarchal way of thinking was that there were no frontiers between cities or empires since a frontier constitutes an admission of a limit to one's control and, as I have pointed out, centrarchs were not prepared to countenance such thoughts. This meant that if travellers kept off the trade routes and avoided the centres of urbanisation they were free to move about very much as they pleased. As a consequence trading families quickly established themselves throughout the region. Unlike the other empire dwellers their loyalty was not to any one centre since their business lay *between* empires rather than *within* any one of them. We know the centrarchs hated such a state of affairs, which cut clean across their cherished 'centre of the world' ideologies, for they invented ingenious ways to get around it. For example we find the king of Mycene in Greece possessing a territorial zone in the city of Ugarit in Canaan while granting the selfsame rights to the opposite Canaanite king in his own territory, each king peopling these enclaves with his own traders. By such means exchanges could take place between centrarchal powers, while leaving intact the myth of each one's total independence. But, of course, such devices did nothing to change the basic pattern of loyalty (or lack of it) of the merchants, so again we would expect to find a high percentage of merchants amongst the marginals.

- Bankrupts

The reverse of the 'wealth creates wealth' phenomenon is the downward spiral into bankruptcy. We know all about this, of course, because of the laws invented by the centrarchs to deal with it and its consequences. However, in spite of their efforts to provide such people with a second chance, for example by limiting the period of debtor

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<sup>267</sup> Manfred Weippert has proposed the English concept "outlaw" as the best translation for 'apiru, which he defines as: "a person who, for some reason or other, stands outside the acknowledged social system and thereby dispenses with the legal protection which the community guarantees to all its members. Manfred Weippert, *The Settlement of the Israelites*, (Society of Biblical Theology, 21, 1967) p. 65.

<sup>268</sup> 'If the term should actually be read *habiru* then the most obvious etymological explanation must be that it is a derivation from the verbal root *br* meaning "to pass by," "trespass" (e.g., a border, a river, or the like), a meaning which would suit the notion of the *habiru* as fugitives/refugees excellently. If the correct rendering of the Akkadian cuneiform is *hapiru*, a derivation from the noun *pr* meaning "dust" or "clay" would be likely; and 'apiru might then have been a popular way of designating people of low social standing.' Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 7.

slavery, the journey downward (or perhaps one should say outward) must often have been on a one way ticket. Consequently we should expect to find an appreciable number of former bankrupts amongst the marginals.<sup>269</sup>

- Criminals

The relative absence of prisons in ancient societies meant that the options for punishing felons in centrarchal society were limited. For example in the Code of Hammurabi the following types of punishment are ordained: expulsion,<sup>270</sup> corporal punishment (in the form of humiliation,<sup>271</sup> flogging,<sup>272</sup> mutilation,<sup>273</sup> and various kinds of death<sup>274</sup>) and compensation and the payment of fines.<sup>275</sup> Invariably offences against the state and superiors were far more severely dealt with than offences against equals<sup>276</sup> or inferiors,<sup>277</sup> and in circumstances where claims for compensation or fines could not be met the individual and his family were summarily sold as slaves.<sup>278</sup> Given this situation and the high number of crimes punishable by death<sup>279</sup> we should certainly expect to find many criminals and their families amongst the ‘Apiru.

What I have set out here are general types of persons one should expect to find making up these ‘Apiru groups. The texts themselves quite naturally seldom give any indication of what such people did for a living *before* they became ‘Apiru. However, we do have the very occasional glimpse:

In a few instances the former occupations of ‘apiru are listed. They include a thief, a slave or servant, and even what appears to be an ex-governor or ex-dynast.<sup>280</sup>

However, the paucity of information of this sort does not mean that the whole thing is an uninformed conjecture since we have evidence from the, in many ways quite similar, feudal societies of the middle ages. In addition, as we shall see, there are clear echoes of the younger son phenomenon within the Bible itself.

### *The ‘Apiru as close associates with fringe-dwellers*

I have been at pains to paint the ‘Apiru as a distinct phenomenon; however, the fact that when free and unattached we find them in the same areas as the fringe-dwellers and sometimes operating alongside of them shows that they must have had a good deal in common with these people. Though centrarchal society saw itself as radiating

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<sup>269</sup> ‘The reasons for this wave of fugitives, which, according to the available sources, seems to have increased in force during the MB and especially the LB, may have varied, and it may be futile to attempt any easy explanation. However, such a factor as debt - resulting in regular debt slavery - may have induced many impoverished peasants of the ancient states to find a living out of reach of the authorities who were going to enslave them as debtors.’ Lemche, *Dictionary*, p. 9.

<sup>270</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 154 *ANET* p. 174

<sup>271</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 127 *ANET* p. 171

<sup>272</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 202 *ANET* p. 175

<sup>273</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 192 - 197, 200, 205. *ANET* p. 175

<sup>274</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 108, 110, 153 *ANET* p.170-2

<sup>275</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 198 - 214 *ANET* p. 175

<sup>276</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 8 *ANET* p. 166

<sup>277</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi cf. 209, 211, 213 *ANET* p. 175

<sup>278</sup> e.g. Code of Hammurabi 54, 117,

<sup>279</sup> Of the 282 laws in the code of Hammurabi 30 involve punishment by death.

<sup>280</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 401



blessings and prosperity on all and sundry its taxation system clearly operated in the opposite direction, draining the surrounding regions of their surplus wealth for the benefit of those at the centre. Consequently, however we may judge these ancient communities (and of course our personal ideological beliefs will greatly affect such a judgement) it cannot be denied that those looking *in* towards the centre would not have shared the same perspective as those looking *out* from it. Indeed the more estranged, *politically* speaking, an individual was from the centrarchical power the greater the difference would have been; likewise, the further away, *geographically* speaking, the more difficult it would have been to impose taxes and the more inclined people would have been to rebel. In other words the place one would most expect to find an open expression of ideological hostility to centrarchical society was at its edges; so it is natural that the ‘Apiru, as political rejects and outlaws, would have been drawn into co-operation with the fringe-dwellers where conditions made this possible.<sup>281</sup>

### *The history of the ‘Apiru*

Up to the 15th century BCE we have no indication that the ‘Apiru were anything more than a nuisance to the Canaanite city dwellers. It would seem that outside their base territory in the wooded mountain zones they had no political aspirations. However, from the correspondence in the 14th century BCE between the Amorite rulers in Palestine and their Egyptian suzerains (the so-called Amarna letters from which the above plea from Abdu-Heba was taken) there are signs that they were now becoming, at least in some areas, serious players on the political scene. It has to be said that it is difficult to know exactly who were the ‘Apiru in these letters, for the name clearly does not indicate a well-defined hostile element within the surrounding population. In other words the name is employed as a sort of ideological swear-word, along the same lines as ‘communist’ or ‘red’ has been in our own society<sup>282</sup> and is used to nail anyone whose behaviour is considered a threat to the common, centrarchical way of life. Thus to cite someone as siding with the ‘Apiru is tantamount to accusing him of heinous treasonable acts, as can be seen in this second letter from Abdu-Heba to the Pharaoh:

I must report to his majesty the activity of Mikilu and Shewedata (Egyptian vassal princes of Gezer and Hebron). After a series of forced marches, using their troops from Gaza, Gath and Kilan, they have attacked and taken the countryside around Rubutu, which has now abandoned the king and sided with the ‘Apiru people. Things have become so bad now that even a town in the vicinity of Jerusalem called Bet-lani has sided with the people of Kailah. I beg the king to listen to his servant Abdu-Heba and send archers so that they might recover the country for the king. If no archers are sent the land will undoubtedly end up in the hands of the ‘Apiru people. I repeat that all this took place at the express demands of Mikilu and Shewedata. The king should protect his country.<sup>283</sup>

With Egyptian power on the wane the Amorite princes were clearly looking to expand their spheres of influence by using ‘Apiru bands against their fellow princelings.<sup>284</sup> The son of Lab’ayu, prince of Shechem, was caught red handed in such an alliance, and reported to the Pharaoh, making it necessary for his father to hastily dissociate himself from his activities:

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<sup>281</sup> For a much fuller description of this situation see Gottwald, *Tribes*.

<sup>282</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 404

<sup>283</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 489

<sup>284</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 400

....furthermore the kings wrote concerning my son. I was in fact totally ignorant that my son was associating with the 'Apiru and have now in proof of this handed him over to Addaya (Egyptian viceroy in Palestine).<sup>285</sup>

However, when faced by a true 'Apiru leader capable of mounting a substantial threat, nominal rivals like Shewedata and Abdu-Heba were quick to forget their differences and make common cause against the real enemy:

I write to report to the king that the leader of the 'Apiru raised an armed rebellion against the land that I hold for the king, but that I have defeated him. I must further inform the king that I was abandoned by all my fellow native princes, and that I was left with only Abdu-Heba to fight against the 'Apiru leader. In fact Zurata, prince of Acco, and Imdaruta, prince of Achshaph, were fighting against me till I bribed them with fifty chariots to come to my assistance, while I was under attack by the 'Apiru. So I beg the king to send Yanhamu (Egyptian viceroy in Palestine) to take strong measures and recover all the country lost for the king.<sup>286</sup>

In summary, what we seem to be witnessing over the centuries in these central wooded mountain zones is a process of selection through marginalisation, leading to the development of a polymorphic society. As far as one can judge from the somewhat scanty data, this developing community, though by no means lacking in internal tension, manifested none-the-less a real unity in its fierce independent spirit and natural distrust and dislike of the centrarchical governments of the city dwellers in the plains. In fact these wooded mountain zones appear to have acted as a social crucible and the 'Apiru as leading players. One can scarcely pretend that research into this development has led historians to hard evidence for a counter ideology that would explain the egalitarian social structures identified by Gottwald within the community called Israel which eventually appeared in this region<sup>287</sup> – if indeed we can properly make a connection between these 'apiru and the Bible's Hebrews<sup>288</sup> or find any justification for treating the biblical texts as witnesses to what took place at this time and place. However, what it has done is provide a very plausible historical cradle for such a counter ideology which I maintain must have taken root in this geographic area somewhere round about this time for otherwise the existence of the biblical ideology (of which there can be no doubt even though academic scholars, one-and-all, blind-eye it) can in no way be explained.

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<sup>285</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 486

<sup>286</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 487

<sup>287</sup> 'While the peoples of Canaan in this period show a steady convergence of consciousness on the desirability and possibility of weakening the Egyptian imperial grip, they do not show a corresponding convergence of consciousness on the desirability and possibility of reorganising their socio-economic and political existence on nonfeudal lines. ... The caution that we can discern no consciously conceived and organised counter-system, or even any particular movement against the system, is of great importance in assessing the 'apiru of Amarna Canaan in terms of their continuities and discontinuities with early Israel.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 398

<sup>288</sup> 'Ever since this Akkadian expression was first recognized in A.D. 1888, viz., in the Amarna letters written by AbdiHepa of Jerusalem around 1375 B.C. (EA 286-90; Greenberg 1955: 47-49) scholars have discussed the significance of the *habiru/hapiru* for the origin of the Israelites.' Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*. p. 6. Note AbdiHepa is simply a different scholarly spelling of Abdu-Heba.

## Chapter 6.

### **The Ideological Scene in the Ancient Israel**

The ideology of a human community is largely a reflection of its composition and genesis and one thing we are not short of are theories about how the Israelite community came to be established in these central Palestinian highlands in the early iron age and therefore models for understanding the community itself:

#### *The Nomadic Invasion Model*

At first it was simply taken for granted that the process was a *nomadic invasion* since this was what the biblical account in the book of Joshua seems to indicate.

#### *The Gradual Infiltration, and Amphictyony Model*

However, such a comfortable understanding was challenged by Albrect Alt<sup>289</sup> and Martin Noth.<sup>290</sup> They argued that the biblical account of the conquest was not reliable and that rather than a victorious armed invasion we should have in mind a *gradual infiltration* of foreign nomads who, on their arrival in central Palestine, bonded together into an *amphictyony*. As they saw things, the violence recorded in the biblical texts must only have come about later when the numbers of the newcomers became so great that tension inevitably arose between them and the indigenous population. While this criticism of the established position was unfolding, another influential Old Testament scholar, W.F. Albright and his Baltimore school, were arguing strenuously in favour of the violent nomadic-conquest model. This gave renewed comfort to conservative scholars, Jewish as well as Christian, who were loath to see the historicity of the biblical texts brought into question.

#### *The Peasant Revolt or Social Revolution Model*

But then George Mendenhall came along with a completely different model. Instead of an invasion by foreign nomads (whether aggressive or pacific) he argued for an *internal peasant revolt*. Building on the situation described in the Amarna letters he advocated that the new settlers in the central highlands were not foreign nomads but, rather, indigenous Canaanites from the city states who had broken with their feudal overlords and withdrawn to the easily defensible but sparsely populated wooded refuge-zones. Norman Gottwald expanded upon this *peasant revolt* theory to produce his own *social*

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<sup>289</sup> A. Alt, The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine, *Essays in Old Testament History and Religion*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) pp. 133-69. The essay first appeared in 1925.

<sup>290</sup> M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, Second Edition 1960). First published in German in 1958.

*revolution* model.<sup>291</sup> He added on the idea that a group of slaves under the leadership of Moses had fled from Egypt and made a covenant with Yahweh in the desert. He suggested that this group had also arrived in these same wooded refuge-zones and, at Shechem, had established their ideological leadership among revolutionary Canaanite peasants; together they had formed a retribalised society called Israel.

### *The Frontier Model*

Naturally enough a number of scholars have criticised Gottwald's work. For example G. Lenski has proposed that a *frontier* model is in some ways better able to explain Israel's genesis.<sup>292</sup> This model is based on such recent examples as the westward expansion of the United States, the populating of Australia and the foundation of the Boer community in South Africa. Lenski does not argue against Gottwald's social revolution but rather maintains that this should be read together with his own frontier model.

### *The Shasu Influx Model*

Donald B. Redford for his part rejects the Mendenhall/Gottwald peasant-revolt model outright. He suggests that the growth in population in the Palestinian highlands in the early iron age, which eventually led to the formation of Israel, was most likely due to the influx of Shasu nomads coming from the south and east. The one bit of firm evidence he offers in support of this theory is from a fifteenth century Egyptian text which speaks of a certain 'Yhw (in) the land of the Shasu'. Redford believes that this individual, who carries the name of the later Israelite god, shows that Yahweh was already being worshiped by Shasu people in an enclave in Edom in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>293</sup>

### *The Returning Exiles Model*

What can we learn from this rather confusing, developing situation? One thing at least has become obvious: we can no longer blithely accept that the Bible provides us with what we denizens of civilisation would call a trustworthy historical outline of the

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<sup>291</sup> The essence of the social revolutionary model is to see the emergence of ancient Israel as a combined socio-political and religious movement with its major base in the peasantry of Canaan. The movement aimed at creating an alternative society of independent farmers, pastoral nomads, artisans, and priestly "intellectuals" who were free from the political domination and interference of the hierarchic city-states that held the upper hand in Canaan. This movement was an intertribal alliance or confederation, based not on pastoral nomadic cultural life but on the revitalization and extension of rural agricultural institutions with real and fictitious kinship ties, neighbourhood and regional residence, and communal mutual assistance. This counter-society had to provide for political self-rule, economic self-help, military self-defence, and cultural self-definition, which gave to its religion (so-called Yahwism) a very prominent role as an alternative ideology for understanding the legitimacy and efficacy of its revolutions. Gottwald, *The Quest*, pp. 6-7

<sup>292</sup> Gottwald *Quest*, pp. 9-10

<sup>293</sup> Redford, *Egypt*, pp. 272-3

Hebrew settlement of Palestine.<sup>294</sup> This is *not* because a wealth of extra-biblical material has suddenly become available making an alternative understanding necessary. Rather it is because the very little we have discovered is quite enough to show that what the biblical writers present us with has little regard for what we products of civilisation call history: the story of the struggle and interplay between the various powers in the area in their search for dominance.<sup>295</sup> So clearly we have to take on board the idea that the biblical authors of this overall pattern had something else in mind than the objective chronicling of the community's history from our 'civilisational' point of view.<sup>296</sup> This realisation has driven scholars to be far more sceptical in judging the biblical evidence. For example, Philip Davies has argued that we should see all of the texts concerning pre-exilic Israel as the product of the scribal 'colleges' in the Persian period.<sup>297</sup> According to him these stories should be understood as deliberate fictions created in order to justify the position and authority of the new Persian-imposed ruling class of returning exiles. His rule of thumb is that since it is undeniable that a great deal of the literary activity involved in the creation of these stories *must* have taken place in this Persian-Hellenistic period, convincing arguments should be put forward if an earlier dating is proposed for any particular passage.<sup>298</sup> This sounds perfectly reasonable to me and we shall bear it in mind when testing his own thesis.

Davies' main concern is to question the received opinion that these texts were based on a communal 'tradition' which grew naturally by stages from being oral, then written down, and then rewritten and edited several times over, till at last it achieved a final form later canonised as scripture.<sup>299</sup> Given this objective he rightly feels he has to show that the texts are best understood as free creations based on no actual knowledge of the community's past and, consequently, that anything within them which does display such a knowledge is only an incidental relic which played no significant part in the

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<sup>294</sup> Fringe-dwelling pastoralists who become slaves in Egypt only to escape into the desert where they train and organise and eventually pluck up the courage to invade and conquer the land.

<sup>295</sup> 'A detailed examination of [the biblical] version of the Hebrew take-over of Palestine with the extra-biblical evidence totally discredits the former. Not only is there a complete absence ... in the records of the Egyptian empire of any mention or allusion to such a whirlwind of annihilation, but also Egyptian control over Canaan and the very cities Joshua is supposed to have taken scarcely wavered during the entire period of the Late Bronze Age.' Redford, *Egypt*, p. 264. See also Ahlström: 'The biblical traditions about the history of Palestine in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE seem to show no historical knowledge about the political scene. For instance, the biblical writers do not know anything about Egypt's rule over the country, nor about the garrison cities and Egyptian temples. No Egyptian campaign is mentioned. Merneptah's destruction of Israel is not known. No Egyptian Pharaoh is mentioned by name before Shosheng (biblical Shishaq) marched through Palestine in the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign (1 Kings 14.25). All this may indicate that annalistic writings did not occur before the emergence of the monarchy.' Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*, n. 4. p. 347.

<sup>296</sup> 'The texts of the Hebrew Bible dealing with the period preceding the emergence of the kingdom of Israel were not intended to present the history of the population of Palestine; it was an ideological-theological advocacy that steered the biblical writers. These writers did not know the settlement patterns and religious ideals of the twelfth century BCE.' Ahlström, *Ancient Palestine* p. 335.

<sup>297</sup> '... the society which grew up in Yehud in the Persian period is the matrix for the production of the biblical Israel.' ... 'The formation of a corpus of literature which comes to be the Bible starts within the society created in Judah in the Persian period.' Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, (Sheffield: JSOT Vol 148 Sheffield, 1992) pp. 95, 98.

<sup>298</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 99-100.

<sup>299</sup> Davies, *In Search*, pp. 96-7.

overall creative process.<sup>300</sup> He therefore seeks to draw a strong dividing line at the time of the exiles 'return', excluding all pertinent knowledge of conditions and events preceding it. He does this by going out of his way to raise doubts about the ancestry of these returning exiles. In this manner he opens the door to the intriguing thought that the people he takes to be the creators of the biblical tradition were quite possibly not even Israelites at all!

I have raised ... the question of whether these immigrants were really descended from Judean deportees. The Persians probably told them that they were, they may have believed it themselves, and it may have been true. But whether or not this was the case, they would have made that claim anyway, and the claim itself therefore is no evidence.<sup>301</sup>

### *Testing the returning exiles model*

How can we test Davies' perfectly reasonable general thesis? One way of doing so is to examine whether or not these stories about the pre-exilic community do include any pertinent knowledge of past conditions which no foreign immigrant to Judah in the Persian period would have known about – apart from the odd archaic relic they could have gleaned from the administrative archives that survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

#### 1. The Hebrew = 'Apiru test.

It is not all that easy to think of ways of showing whether a text betrays a pertinent knowledge of pre-exilic conditions since, apart from the brief glimpses we get from the inscription on king Idrimi's statue and from the Amarna letters, we know very little of what was going on in these central highlands either before or indeed after the exile. That said, one fact does stand out: The 'Apiru, who figure quite strongly in extra-biblical inscriptions disappear completely from all the records towards the end of the second millennium BCE.<sup>302</sup> This means that if we can establish a firm connection of some sort between the 'Apiru of the extra biblical sources and the Bible's Hebrews then Davis thesis is effectively blown. For it is highly unlikely that, five hundred years after the 'Apiru had disappeared from the scene Judean/Persian scribes would have chosen to use the word Hebrew = 'Apiru = Marginal as a label for the fictitious historical ancestors they invented for themselves - to say nothing of the unlikelihood of their inventing such a discreditable ancestry in the first place.

This connection Hebrew = 'Apiru has long been fought over by scholars. Those who were anxious to find confirmation of the Bible's historicity were at first tremendously excited to find what they saw as confirmation of the existence of the Hebrews in the Amarna letters. However, doubts in their minds immediately arose since in these letters Abdu-Heba the king of Jerusalem speaks of 'apiru people threatening the city in the middle of the fourteenth century whereas according to the Bible Jerusalem was not attacked by the Israelites until the early days of King David, ca. 1000 B.C. However, the case for the connection steadily grew and by the end of the nineteenth century it

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<sup>300</sup> 'Here, of course, I am excluding relics from this earlier period ... The existence of such relics is not, on my definition, part of the literary process any more than the existence of chaos is part of the process of creation.'

<sup>301</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 117.

<sup>302</sup> See note 258 on p. 86 above.

became generally accepted until new discoveries from all over the ancient Near East were made of texts mentioning these 'apiru people. These made it clear that the term 'apiru did not indicate an ethnic community but rather a social group of some sort, foreign refugees of little or no consequence being the best general description.<sup>303</sup> Niles P. Lemche claims that this discovery means that if we now wish to continue recognising some sort of a connection between the biblical Hebrews and the extra-biblical 'apiru peoples we have at least to recognise some shift in meaning:

Since the expression *habiru/hapiru* evidently covers a social phenomenon, whereas Hebrew in the OT, with perhaps one exception (Exod 21:2-11, the law concerning Hebrew slaves), always stands for members of the Israelite people, a certain shift of meaning has taken place.<sup>304</sup>

However, I believe he is mistaken. For, as we shall see, though it is certainly true to say that the word Hebrew in the Bible is generally used of Israelites it is only ever used when speaking of Israelites as seen from the point of view of their centrarchal overlords.<sup>305</sup> In other words the expression is never used when speaking of Israelites as seen from their own point of view. This means that *the word is systematically employed as a derogatory centrarchal appellation* which one must suppose could easily have been used by Biblical writers to describe people in a similar condition elsewhere in the ancient Near East, should they find any need to do such a thing, which of course, they didn't. It would seem that Lemche is aware of some of this:

It is, however, interesting to note how some aspects of the former social meaning of the expression have survived almost everywhere in the OT where the expression is used. Thus in the story of Joseph and in Exodus, the word "Hebrew" is always used to refer to the Israelite refugees in Egypt, in contradistinction to the local population or authorities, and in I Samuel only the Philistines speak about Hebrews, normally in a derogatory sense, to indicate runaway slaves or renegades (David, who is considered to have deserted his own master, King Saul, is thus styled by his Philistine superiors in 1 Sam 29:3). Even in such late texts as Gen 14:23 and Jonah 1:9, relicts of the former sociological meaning of the expression may be supposed to be behind the present usage.<sup>306</sup>

Here Lemche makes it quite clear that, like most scholars, he still sees some sort of a connection between the extra-biblical 'Apiru and the biblical Hebrews:

Irrespective of the relative age of those texts in the OT which mention the Hebrews, it is therefore true to maintain that the OT usage is based on an old and historical tradition.<sup>307</sup>

If this connection is admitted, as I believe it must be, then post-exilic Persian scribes could hardly have been the ones responsible for creating the biblical stories about the Hebrews as Davies maintains. So here, it seems to me, we are faced with what certainly looks like pertinent knowledge of ancient historical conditions within these texts.

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<sup>303</sup> 'Today most orientalists consider that the expression *habiru/hapiru* encompassed fugitives who had left their own states either to live as refugees in other parts of the Near East or outlaws who subsisted as brigands out of reach of the authorities of the states.' Niles P. Lemche, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol III* ed: David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday 1992) p. 95.

<sup>304</sup> Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 95.

<sup>305</sup> See pp. 122-124 below.

<sup>306</sup> Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 95.

<sup>307</sup> Lemche, *Anchor Dictionary*, p. 95.

## 2. The direction of the ideological enemy test

Over and above this there is one other general piece of information which might be of some use in testing Davies' thesis. Until the arrival on the Assyrian throne of Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BCE the central Palestinian highlands were technically under the control of Egypt which, of course, lay to the south and west of Palestine. After this date, however, the centre of power switched dramatically. From then on, right up to the Persian period, it became situated in the completely opposite direction: to the north and east. Which way do the texts concerned with the establishment of the community describe Israel as turning to face her centrarchal enemy?

As part of the work of dovetailing together the Genesis myths and patriarchal stories – concluding the former and introducing the latter – the 'final' editor(s) of the book included a catalogue of Israel's arch enemies under the rubric 'the sons of Ham'.<sup>308</sup> Here we find the Mesopotamian powers listed as the progeny of Ham's first son Cush (Ethiopia), while Egypt (together with its vassal states on the coastal plain of Palestine – the Philistines) is listed as Ham's second son, and Canaan, as the father of all of Israel's proximate rival powers in the central highlands, is listed as Ham's third son.<sup>309</sup> The priority given in this list to the Mesopotamian powers to the north and east certainly squares with someone writing from a post-exilic perspective, as is dictated by Davies' thesis. However, when we look at the actual patriarchal stories themselves this is no longer the case. Here, on the contrary, the centrarchal enemy is always seen as lying to the south and west. Indeed the only story which fits a post-745 BCE scenario is the curious incident of Abraham's victory over the eastern kings in Genesis 14, which Von Rad<sup>310</sup> has shown to be an erratic block inserted by some scribal editor at a late date into the surrounding material. Apart from this story the only eastward references within this material have to do with the country from which Abraham came and to which his progeny always turn in order to find non-Canaanite wives. This country, called either Haran or Nahor (the names of Abraham's two brothers), and variously described as being either somewhere on the road between Ur and Canaan<sup>311</sup> or a city in

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<sup>308</sup> Genesis 10.1-20

<sup>309</sup> According to Von Rad 'Put', as a son of Ham, was introduced later by the priestly source. In any case he seems to appear for no good reason! Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 139

<sup>310</sup> 'This chapter contains some of the most difficult and most debated material in the patriarchal history, indeed, in the entire historical part of the Old Testament. First of all, its substance differs from that of all the patriarchal stories. It takes us out into world history, tells of a coalition of empires, a war against another coalition, and it involves Abraham in this international incident. The picture, accordingly, which it gives of Abraham as a "travelling prince of war" is quite different from that of the other Abraham narratives. But the tradition in ch. 14 must be estimated quite differently with respect to its form, *i.e.*, "gattungsgeschichtlich." The events are not told with the usual vividness but are reported like a chronicle. Almost every sentence is full of antiquarian information, and nowhere in the patriarchal stories do we find such a mass of historical and geographical detail. Recent study of the ancient Near East has shown that much of this material must derive from very ancient tradition. On the other hand, however, it must be emphasized that none of the patriarchal stories contains so much that is fantastic, historically impossible, and miraculous. Gunkel's statement is as true today as it was fifty years ago: "The narrative contains in blatant contrast very credible and quite impossible material." We are dealing, therefore, with tradition which was quite separate from the rest of the patriarchal tradition. Chapter 14 is a "world in itself" (L. Kbhler). No wonder that this chapter cannot be connected with one of the Hexateuchal sources! It is substantially, generically, and literarily completely isolated and was apparently first incorporated into its present context by a redactor (though this, of course, gives no indication of the age of the material).' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 175.

<sup>311</sup> Gen 11.31



Mesopotamia,<sup>312</sup> or simply ‘the land of the people of the east’<sup>313</sup> could be almost anywhere<sup>314</sup> and certainly isn’t a symbol for Israel’s feared or respected centrarchal overlord. That position is always reserved in these stories for Egypt and her Philistine or Canaanite lackeys. So, once again, we have here the expression of some pertinent knowledge of pre-745 BCE conditions, however vague and imprecise it may be. This means that it does not seem feasible to attribute the creation of these stories to the scribes of the Persian period, as Davies does.

### 3. The ‘Do the stories fit the pattern?’ test

Another way of testing Davies’ thesis is to see whether the Genesis and Exodus stories do in fact fit the ‘exile’ pattern thereby justifying the position and authority of the ‘returnee’ exiles.

The patriarchal stories, the Exodus story and the conquest stories are surely relics of once alternative explanations of land occupation by aliens, later drawn into a single narrative... the underlying perspective in nearly all three is similar: an alien ‘Israel’ is given the land by its deity, and occupies it by right, conditional upon scrupulous cultic observance.<sup>315</sup>

Notice how carefully Davies hedges his claim. To vindicate his thesis he would really have to show that the central thrusts of all of these stories fundamentally fit his returnee exiles pattern. However, what he actually claims is that the *underlying perspective* in *nearly* all three of them is *similar* in containing elements he believes are essential to the returnee exile pattern! These qualifications are a sure sign that he is aware that the evidence<sup>316</sup> is weak, which indeed it is. In fact it seems to me that the basic pattern of the patriarchal stories is not really about Israel’s occupation of a god-given land at all. Its concern is rather with the numerous difficulties which Israel, as an ideologically aware community of former marginals, has to face when living within the bounds of Egypt’s hostile centrarchal hegemony. Likewise, I would submit that the basic pattern of the Exodus story is concerned not with a divinely inspired land occupation but rather with a marginal community’s divine liberation and training for some great world-wide task. Of course I would not deny that the overall thread holding the three stories together is that of Israel’s ‘long march’ to the promised land but this could be just the imprint of the final editorial hand when the stories were knitted together. What we are talking about here is the basic thrusts of the individual compositions and in the case of the patriarchal and exodus stories the occupation of the promised land appears to be a secondary editorial theme, not the primary thrust.

As far as the third story, the conquest, is concerned there is certainly a question of land occupation by divine right but even here there is a difficulty. In it the occupiers are called Israel not Judah. How is it possible to explain this curious choice of name when,

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<sup>312</sup> Gen 24.10

<sup>313</sup> Gen 29.1

<sup>314</sup> ‘The narrator tells nothing further of Jacob’s long journey. He transfers us at once to the “people of the east.” The expression is very general. It designates both the south-eastern Arabian neighbours of Israel and the north-eastern Aramean neighbours. But the narrative takes no pains at all to say anything special about the locale, i.e., about the cities there, etc. Conditions in that foreign place are the same as everywhere.’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 288.

<sup>315</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 118

<sup>316</sup> which he doesn’t even bother to provide!

according to Davies' thesis, the authors were all inhabitants of Jerusalem and therefore Judeans? Wouldn't it have been more natural for them to write a story of a fictional super-nation called Judah from which a tribal splinter group called Israel treacherously seceded?<sup>317</sup> Davies doesn't answer this question directly but hints that the choice of name was dictated by the desire to create a jurisdiction which would cover the entire Persian satrapy (or half-satrapy) of 'Beyond the River'.<sup>318</sup> However, this is not really an answer at all. I find it inconceivable that a group of would-be Judeans, intent on laying claim to the whole of Palestine, would choose the name of a rival community for their fictional 'lost empire'.<sup>319</sup> Indeed it seems to me far more likely that what we have in this name Israel, signifying the two communities combined, is some historical memory of how things had actually once stood (whether or not a united monarchy was involved) which not even the returning exiles could ignore.<sup>320</sup>

#### 4. The revolutionary ideology test

Though all these facts militate against Davies' thesis the principle reason why I find it unsustainable lies elsewhere: in the realm of ideology. Davies is perfectly aware that the purpose of these texts is ideological and on this we can easily agree. However, the controlling ideology he seems to find within them is not the one which catches and fixes my attention – nor the attention of most other people, I suspect. Since this is a crucial matter it will be necessary to pay close attention to his argument. Davies claims to see *several* ideologies present in these texts.<sup>321</sup> That said, he makes it pretty clear that one in particular controls the biblical literature as a whole, both as a result of the shared conditions experienced by the scribes who wrote it as well as of their shared overall objective.<sup>322</sup> He sees this dominant ideology as being the political-cultural product of the Jerusalem 'establishment' based in the Temple and the court of the governor<sup>323</sup> and he characterises it as both nationalistic and elitist:

I have argued ... that a major motivation of the literary effort of the scribes was the establishment of a national identity in which the status of the existing rulers, of recent immigration, as the indigenous elite, was secured, for their own satisfaction as much as anyone else's. And although the temple cult and the veneration of their own version of the high god (given the name of the local deity, Yahweh, among others) is an element in this endeavour, the endeavour itself is not essentially religious but rather cultural. To describe how one's deity

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<sup>317</sup> Especially given Davies claim that these texts were created in large part to establish what it meant to be a Judean: 'a major motivation of the literary effort of the scribes was the establishment of a national identity.' '... a definition of what it meant to be a Judean.' *In Search*, p. 114 and 133

<sup>318</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 90

<sup>319</sup> '... by the time that this piece of fiction (Artaxerxes' decree prohibiting the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem) was written, the history of what is to become the biblical Israel was well under way: the clerks of the Ministry of History in Yehud were already claiming their tiny province to be the relic of a once mighty empire, indeed claiming some kind of jurisdiction over the entire satrapy (or half-satrapy) of 'Beyond the River', the land promised to Abraham in Genesis and ruled over by David and Solomon.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 90.

<sup>320</sup> In other words it was not a choice at all but rather an ancient fact not to be denied.

<sup>321</sup> '... although the same ideological momentum is common to all the literature, the details can differ.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 91.

<sup>322</sup> 'I have warned ... against drawing the conclusion that the biblical literature incorporates a seamless ideology. The coherence that there is, which is considerable, is explained by shared preconditions and by a deliberate attempt at some stage to produce a single written history out of a number of alternative and partial ones.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 118

<sup>323</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 20

created the universe, gave his adopted people their land, and guided their history does not determine a religion, nor does the historicizing of agricultural festivals betoken a religious tradition. It is rather an act of ideological imperialism by which a ruling caste appropriates the native peasant customs and, depriving them of all that is meaningful to the peasant, turns them into celebrations of their own dominant ideology: their acquisition of the law, their deliverance from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness.<sup>324</sup>

When it comes to identifying possible subsidiary ideologies Davies naturally looks in the first instance to the different organizations in which these scribal authors would have found employment: the governor's court or the Temple.<sup>325</sup> He also suggests that certain scribes may have purposely designed their texts to correct imbalances found in those of rival schools, thus producing alternative, secondary, ideological perspectives.<sup>326</sup> He detects one important strain of secondary ideology associated closely if not exclusively with the prophetic texts. He calls it 'social criticism' and he sees it as stemming from internal criticism engendered within the scribal movement.<sup>327</sup>

What might we make of the [purpose served by the] social criticism embedded in these texts, the political comment and the ethical teaching?. Aside from the obvious but unlikely one that this literature comes from ancient social protesters who were also spontaneous poets, there are two possible answers, and they are not mutually exclusive. One is that there is no serious purpose, but, as I have suggested, only an effort to master a genre (and improve one's scribal 'classical Hebrew' at the same time). Another is that a good deal of genuine social criticism is embedded here. If so, it would not be surprising to find it in the composition of apprentice scribes, or perhaps even of graduated scribes. Simply because scribes work for the government does not mean that they admire or approve of it. If we have an image of scribes as dull, dusty, pedantic and unimaginative hacks, we, at least as biblical scholars, are condemning ourselves, for they are our forebears. I do not at all resist the idea that there is real anger, real morality, real passion in this poetry. But I see no reason to attribute it to 'prophets' nor to anyone before the fifth century BCE.<sup>328</sup>

For someone like myself who has attempted to make this so called 'social criticism' the object of a lifetime's commitment<sup>329</sup> Davies' suggestion that it is based on nothing more serious than the youthful creativity and rebelliousness of a group of 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Persian intellectuals comes as something of a shock. I have to admit that my immediate reaction was of outrage. Does he really expect people to believe that the prophetic ideology which Jesus sought to embody was the creation of such people and of such an endeavour... ? But we must bite our tongue and respond to his arguments historically, not ideologically!

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<sup>324</sup> Davies, *In Search*, pp. 114-15

<sup>325</sup> 'It is, I think, possible that a struggle between priestly and non-priestly elements in Second Temple society might be seen within the literature, though it is always hazardous to assign such ideological differences to well-defined groups. This ought to be resisted in favour of a model which seeks merely to determine the extent of influence of each ideology on the authorship(s) of particular biblical scrolls.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 128

<sup>326</sup> 'But not all scribes were so deferential to their own artistic products. A second tendency is found among some, like the writers of Job, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, and those who wrote up stories about David and Solomon, who were less reverential and attacked the hagiographic tendencies of the literature. They satirised, for instance, the simplistic retribitional theory which had become the official college line (we call it Deuteronomistic).' Davies, *In Search*, p. 133

<sup>327</sup> 'the fate of the best critics of an establishment is to be included posthumously within it, since their criticism is more damaging outside it.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 133

<sup>328</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 124

<sup>329</sup> However badly carried out!

What Davies presents us with is a complete reversal of the heretofore received understanding: that the prophetic books containing this so called ideology of ‘social criticism’<sup>330</sup> (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah?) constitute older pre-exilic writings while the books with a so called ‘elitist/nationalist’ ideology (Ezra, Nehemiah, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, Joel, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah?) are much later exilic or even post exilic works. Davies claims that, on the contrary, all of these texts should be seen as having a similar, late post-exilic date, the elitist/nationalistic features within them resulting from the dominant ideology of the intellectual ruling class and the social criticism resulting from a secondary, contemporaneous reaction by scribal students as they enjoyed expressing their rebelliousness whilst learning the ropes of their profession.<sup>331</sup> So the question we are faced with is this: given we all agree that there is an important ideological differentiation within these texts (however we like to define it and wherever we personally wish to draw the lines) how do these ideological strands interrelate?<sup>332</sup> Is what we find in the Bible to be explained *grossomodo* as the result of the establishment of a dominant ideology (of some sort) closely followed by a series of virtually contemporaneous reactions to it, as per Davies? Or is it better understood as the result of the establishment of a revolutionary ideology (of some sort) followed by a fairly extensive history of revisionist and counter revisionist struggles?

Up till fairly recently the answer to this question appeared obvious. Because it had always been understood that the ‘social criticism’ texts are considerably older, the later ‘nationalistic and elitist’ texts had naturally been seen as a bit of subsequent revisionism: attempts by the post-exilic, ruling establishment to make the social criticism less threatening to their interests. However, by claiming that there is no sure way of dating *any* of these texts to the pre-exilic period Davies has questioned the sequence of events on which such an understanding had heretofore been based. So is there any sure way of deciding this question independently of the dating issue which remains in so much doubt?<sup>333</sup> I believe there is and it has to do with *the essentially ‘revolutionary’ nature of the Yahwist’s*<sup>334</sup> *work.*

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<sup>330</sup> Though I understand what Davies is talking about when he speaks of ‘social criticism’ I do not in fact agree with this labelling. As I understand it the pre-exilic prophets were not concerned with social criticism. Their intention was to expose Israel’s covenant breaking.

<sup>331</sup> ‘I .. think it entirely feasible that the task of constructing a history of the society in which the cult, laws and ethos of the ruling caste would be authorized was undertaken deliberately and conscientiously by the scribes serving the ruling caste, partly at their behest, partly from self-interest, and no doubt partly for sheer creative enjoyment.’ Davies, *In Search*, p. 120

<sup>332</sup> Though I am not altogether happy with the ideological distinction Davies describes I see a distinction which I have already drawn attention to when comparing the Yahwist creation myth in Genesis 2-3 with the Priestly creation myth in Genesis 1.

<sup>333</sup> So relieving us of the necessity of appealing simply to peoples’ gut feeling that nothing of such magnitude as the Hebrew ideology could possibly be founded on anything as trivial as the juvenile rebelliousness of a group of student intellectuals, graduate or undergraduate.

<sup>334</sup> For most of the twentieth century ‘the Yahwist’ was the name given to the anonymous author of the so called J source. Though it is no longer fashionable I use the word in the same manner though I define the J source not linguistically or culturally but ideologically, according to its characteristic ‘revolutionary’ political colour. I am not basically concerned whether *my* Yahwist turns out to be a ‘revolutionary’ individual or a tradition of ‘revolutionary’ writers. For me the term is a convenience to designate a ‘revolutionary’ tradition that stands out strongly against the later post-exilic revisionist tradition and even against the other ideologically questionable pre-exilic sources.

To understand my argument it is necessary to understand what I mean by the revolutionary process. What we today consider as a 'normal' revolution consists of a movement within society whereby a much more numerous, yet less well organised, lower/dominated social class (or classes) seeks to overcome and replace the rule established by the much smaller, yet better equipped, higher class. For convenience let us call such movements 'class revolutions' the understanding being that they constitute a more-or-less violent process whereby a society struggles to develop towards a more advanced and productive state by resolving the internal contradictions imposed by its own class structure.<sup>335</sup> Clearly the picture of Israel, which the biblical texts present (whether this is judged to be historical or otherwise) is *not* that of a class-revolutionary movement. The reason for saying this is threefold.

- The movement at its inception (in Egypt) is not described as consisting of a number of social under classes but rather of people who have no stake in civilisation at all, their being, as marginals, effectively excluded.<sup>336</sup>

- The immediate objective of the movement is not described as being to forcibly overthrow the rulers of civilisation but rather to shame them into setting the Hebrew community free so that it can set up an alternative society operating under radical solidarity (i.e. free of all marginalising tendencies).<sup>337</sup>

- The long-term objective of the movement is not described as being to change civilisation by means of class struggle but rather to prick its conscience and shame it into abandoning its inhumane, oppressive behaviour by demonstrating a humane, non-marginalizing way of living thus eventually causing civilisation to soften its collective heart and convert.<sup>338</sup>

In other words this Hebrew 'revolution' is unmistakably different from class revolutions. For these latter are internal civilization-phenomena, which is to say struggles that are part and parcel of the natural way in which human society is capable of developing. The Hebrew 'revolution', on the contrary, is clearly an external phenomenon which, though designed to affect civilization, leaves no permanent *structural* mark upon it. In other words, whereas a class revolution, once accomplished, leads society on to a higher level of organisation, the Hebrew 'revolution' can never be accomplished in the same way but always has to be performed anew. This is why in its case I have put the word revolution in inverted commas. In some ways it might have been better to have used a completely different term; but I find there isn't one, for reasons which I will discuss below. Consequently I would have had to make one up, which in my opinion is something you should only do as a last resort. However, since the basic *bouleversement* caused by the Israel/Hebrew movement is very similar to that of a normal class revolution, especially in its complexity, I have preferred nonetheless to employ the term even while indicating my recognition of the Hebrew movement's special characteristics.

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<sup>335</sup> Obviously bourgeois and proletarian revolutions are class-revolutions.

<sup>336</sup> This remains the case even when they live within society's bounds as slaves or mercenaries.

<sup>337</sup> According to the story, because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart this objective is not achieved, thus forcing a change of tactics and a bolt for freedom.

<sup>338</sup> According to the story this objective remains unachieved as a result of Israel's lack of ideological commitment combined with the obduracy of civilisation's hardness of heart.

The basis of my argument concerning the intrinsically ‘revolutionary’ nature of the Yahwist’s work is that the new society, which he describes as being set up during what we now call the early iron age, in the highland refuge zones of central Palestine<sup>339</sup> (and whose social structures Gottwald as a sociologist examines and categorises as egalitarian) may indeed be a complete fabrication, as Davies claims, *but its character as a marginal enterprise established, as it were, in the face of centrarchal authority*<sup>340</sup> *whether fictive or real, is beyond legitimate dispute – or so I would claim.*

So, given as read the marginal character of the Hebrew ‘revolution’, we must now ask ourselves whether the Bible’s extended story about it (whether fictive or real)

- comprising a ‘revolutionary’ situation – oppression in Egypt;<sup>341</sup>
- giving rise to a ‘revolutionary’ leadership – the antihero Moses;<sup>342</sup>
- who proposed an ideology – ‘Yahwism’;<sup>343</sup>
- and a short term strategy – escape to a promised land;<sup>344</sup>
- which brought into existence a community with ‘revolutionary’ structures;<sup>345</sup>
- which sustained a ‘revolutionary’ movement with a long term strategy – Israel, servant of Yahweh, as the light to lighten the Gentiles;<sup>346</sup>
- which in course of time were tested both by counter-‘revolutionary’ forces – the Philistine invasion,<sup>347</sup>
- leading to structural compromise – kingship;<sup>348</sup>
- and internal revisionism – Baalism versus Yahwism;
- leading to an extended history of ideological struggle and the prophetic accusation that Israel was guilty of covenant breaking ...

... is the sort of thing which trainee establishment scribes (or indeed any scribes ancient or modern for that matter) could possibly have dreamed up over a period of years?

Youthful rebelliousness is of course a well-known phenomenon which can reveal itself at all levels of society – including that of the ruling elite. Characteristically it is unpredictable, surprising observers both by its volatility and transitoriness; witness the student uprising in France in May 1968. This, of course, is due to the fact that it is the product of an alienation which, while being intensely perceived, is intrinsically ephemeral. It was of course this characteristic of the May uprising which made the French proletarian organisations naturally suspicious of it. The truth is that nothing of this volatility or transitoriness is evident in the biblical texts. Indeed, given the necessarily intimate connection between the character of a revolutionary movement and the interests giving rise to it, it is difficult to take Davies’ thesis seriously even for a moment of inattention. There is nothing to make us suppose that 5<sup>th</sup> century Judeo-Persian scribes would have shared the marginal interests which the biblical story is all

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<sup>339</sup> Without using such expressions of course!

<sup>340</sup> Though not ‘in opposition to’ – since that would indicate a Marxist revolution!

<sup>341</sup> See Ex 1.8-14.

<sup>342</sup> See next chapter.

<sup>343</sup> See Chapter 8 & 9 below.

<sup>344</sup> See Ex 3.7-8.

<sup>345</sup> See Gottwald, *Tribes*

<sup>346</sup> See Gen 12.1-3, Is 42,1-7, 49.6, 51.4, 58.6-14.

<sup>347</sup> See 1 Sam. & Judg 13-16.

<sup>348</sup> See 1 & 2 Sam.

about – so I maintain<sup>349</sup> – and everything to make us suppose that they wouldn't. For clearly they would have had nothing to gain and everything to lose in expounding its ideology. In fact, all the signs are that the real 5<sup>th</sup> century scribes (as opposed to those of Davies' imagination) spent much of their time carefully preserving the Hebrew ideology by covering it up just as their modern counterparts, like Davies himself, have continued to do – *le trahison des clercs!*

When we take into account the full picture of the Hebrew 'revolutionary' movement as outlined above – which, though it is as plain as a pikestaff, scholars will assuredly complain they cannot see – Davies' thesis appears more than a little far-fetched. In the first place a revolution, involving as it does a great many interlocking factors (see above), is an extremely complex phenomenon. This makes it, even as an actual historical event, exceedingly difficult to adequately describe. In this it is quite unlike all the other forms of political upheaval, which explains why it is that, though human literature is littered with stories of imaginary wars, political coups, insurgencies and the like I cannot personally think of a single account of an *imaginary* revolution which offers any real sense of credibility. Then again, while it would be an extraordinary feat for a single writer to create a credible story about an imaginary revolution, what Davies wants us to believe is that this story was written by a group of people who, though they may possibly have known each other, worked independently. This, to my mind, is quite incredible. For while I can certainly imagine a number of people writing about the different phases of an actual revolution and then some editor gathering their works together to create a fairly adequate account of the movement and its history as a whole, it is surely beyond belief that a group of people working independently could somehow imagine such a thing into existence,<sup>350</sup> even if they did share a 'revolutionary' outlook, which was certainly not the case with Davies' Judeo-Persian scribes.

If this were not enough we then have to take into account the fact that though we know about any number of class revolutions from the last two or three centuries, we have no accounts of the phenomenon in the ancient world with the possible exception of the Athenian revolution which itself is seen as being a quite extraordinary one-off phenomenon. This dearth of class revolutions in the ancient world is hardly surprising, given Marx's observation that revolutions are the natural means by which a society is able to move to a higher stage of development. For in those early days civilization was itself a very new phenomenon and the lower classes had nowhere achieved the necessary state of understanding and organisation to mount a challenge to the ruling elite. What this means is that the revolutionary pattern (now so familiar to us) was in all likelihood unknown to people living in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Consequently, to accept Davies' thesis we have to conceive of these young scribes together imagining something the like of which had never been experienced. For if class revolutions are relatively scarce in human history (and virtually unheard of in the ancient world) the Hebrew marginal 'revolution' stands alone in the annals of mankind as far as I am aware. I am not saying, of course, that groups of marginals never found themselves in

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<sup>349</sup> I have to make this caveat since the scholarly mind insists on pretending not to see what I find all too glaringly obvious!

<sup>350</sup> It has to be remembered that the 'revolutionary' characteristics of these texts are not features introduced by an editorial hand but rather essential aspects of their construction.

a position to revolt in the ancient world for they must have done. Indeed we have a good example of just such an uprising in the rebellion of Roman gladiators under Spartacus in 73-71 BCE and must suppose that similar situations occurred from time to time even if infrequently. However, revolts such as this have a completely different form to the sort of thing described in the Bible or in Marxist theory. Presumably, people who found themselves in such rebellious movements must have envisaged their future in one of two ways: If they were strong enough to fancy their chances they would have seen themselves as becoming the new ruling class. If they realised that this was out of the question they would have tried to escape in order to find a new life for themselves away from their oppressors. That Spartacus' own movement eventually failed was probably due in part to the rebels' difficulty in deciding between these conflicting strategies. Though the biblical account of the Hebrew 'revolution' tells of a slave movement which successfully adopted the second, escapist option it goes on to describe how it eventually developed a self-understanding which took it into a completely different league. For, according to the story, the new community ended up seeing itself neither as a rival ruling class nor as an exercise in escapism but as a movement *designed* to transform the world. It is this perfectly logical yet sublime foolishness which makes the term 'revolution' appropriate to early Israel *and to no other movement which we know of in human history in any shape or form*. And it is this 'revolutionary' pattern which made the Hebrew movement unimaginable ... until it happened sometime, somewhere, of course.

But haven't people often been led to imagine Utopias, Plato's republic being a case in point, emerging within the ancient world itself? So why shouldn't we see the biblical story in the same imaginary light? It seems to me that it would certainly be *logical* to suppose that the kingdom of God, as the society which the Hebrew 'revolution' was designed to bring about, was an Utopia, if it were not for the fact that whenever it appears in the texts it has nothing of an Utopia's realistic, down-to-earth character.<sup>351</sup> However, the kingdom of God only figures peripherally in the story of the Hebrew 'revolution' and the 'revolution' itself is not put forward as an intellectual exercise, as a sort of blueprint for a perfect society (which is what an Utopia is). It is, rather, a hands-on *strategy* for changing the present order. And while I can understand the point of trying to imagine a perfect society I find it difficult to see the usefulness of trying to imagine the history of a perfect strategic movement designed to introduce such a society. A strategy, after all, is something you work out on the ground. Consequently, though it is certainly true that people argue about the line which should be taken in any given situation by putting forward alternative strategies, they do not make their case by presenting full-scale, imaginary, utopic histories. It could be done, of course, but it is not what in fact happens, for all too numerous reasons.

The more you think about it the more you are driven to see that this story of the Hebrew 'revolution' cannot possibly be explained as an utopian dream imagined collectively by 5<sup>th</sup> century Judeo-Persian scribes – or anyone else for that matter. Consequently, the basis of this story has to have been *an actual 'revolutionary' event the various stages of which various people reported in their various manners and others then edited according to their various lights*.

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<sup>351</sup> E.g. Is 11; 40. 10-11; 49. 8-13, 22-23; 55; 56.1-8; 60;61; 62; 65.17-25.



It is necessary to be absolutely clear about what I am arguing for here. What I am saying is that something *very like* what is described in the biblical texts must have happened since this ridiculous yet sublime strategy for world transformation (itself an undeniable feature in these texts as we will come to see) is quite inexplicable without it. For such a strategy is not the sort of thing that civilization peoples would ever have dreamed up. Indeed, it is not even the sort of thing which marginals would naturally invent. In fact it can *only* be satisfactorily explained as something extraordinary to which some marginal people gave expression as a result of their participation in an actual ‘revolution’ of some kind. So the bottom line is this: there must have been some sort of ‘revolution’ of marginals. However, the historicity of the details of this ‘revolution’ is quite another matter. The mere existence of the world-transformation strategy certainly implies a ‘revolution’ but not necessarily one *which started in Egypt, or which structured itself in central Palestine, or which led to a war with the Philistines*. This means, of course, that this ‘revolution’ may or may not have begun as a result of the oppression of some Hebrew slaves in Egypt in around 1300 BCE. Equally it may or it may not have been the case that its ‘revolutionary’ structures were put in place during the early iron age in central Palestine and were the ones which Gottwald analyses and categorises as egalitarian. Likewise it may or may not be historical that this ‘revolutionary’ movement encountered the hostility of Philistine ‘counter-revolutionary’ forces and was forced to introduce a structure of kingship under Saul and David as an historical compromise. And, of course, it may or may not be true that it involved a history of struggle in which the Jerusalem/Samaritan establishments were pitted against ‘revolutionary’ individuals who raised the whole issue of covenant-breaking. However, having admitted all this to be the case, it also has to be conceded that *it is inadmissible to pretend that nothing like what is described in the Bible took place since nothing else could possibly explain the existence of this foolish yet sublime strategy of world transformation which apologists of civilization (including in our own day university academics) have almost always done their best to ignore or explain away*. For such an idea *could only* have been forged in the sort of ‘revolutionary’ situation described in the book of Exodus. And such an idea *could only* have matured in a community consciously structured differently from the way in which civilization naturally structures itself, for example along the egalitarian lines Gottwald describes. And such an idea *could only* have brought forth a hostile response from civilisation. And such an idea *would undoubtedly* have called forth an historical compromise. And such an idea *would inevitably* have led to a revisionist/anti-revisionist struggle involving practical men of good sense on one side and extremists with impossible dreams on the other – as civilization people like ourselves would deem! *This means that while historians are perfectly free to cast doubts on the individual scenarios which make up the biblical story they are obliged to offer a viable historical alternative justifying the existence of the Hebrew ideology and the ‘revolutionary’ pattern in its entirety since it is beyond belief that they were simply imagined.*

But this is not what Davies does. Take, for example, his suggestion concerning a post-exilic starting point for what I have termed the Hebrew ‘revolution’. He claims that the exodus story may be based on the experience of Judean garrison troops who had initially been installed in Egypt by the Assyrians but who had been forced to return to

their country of origin as a result of the Egyptian independence movement during the Persian period.<sup>352</sup> The trouble with this suggestion is that though it makes some attempt to account for the entirely *inessential* Egyptian origins of this world transformation strategy, it fails to account for its *essential* marginal and ‘revolutionary’ characteristics. There is, as I see it, no earthly reason why garrison troops should view themselves as marginals or why they should return home with a transforming world ‘revolution’ belief. Indeed, all Davies succeeds in doing by putting forward this clever suggestion is to turn our attention *away from* the world transformation strategy which, as the heart of the biblical story, is what he as an historian should be trying to explain in terms of its historical roots.<sup>353</sup>

This pattern, in which the Bible’s perfectly credible pre-exilic scenarios are replaced by somewhat incredible post-exilic substitutes, seems to be Davies’ speciality. And it always has the same disastrous effect; the blind-eying of the only thing of which we can be absolutely assured: the historicity of the ‘revolutionary’ strategy. Take, for example, his proposed reconstruction of the prophetic material.

Biblical prophecy has slender roots in any social activity we would call 'prophetic'. Possibly it was informed by contemporary behaviour such as 'street theatre'. But there are difficulties in tracing the materials back to historical figures. Even if we could be confident of the existence of a prophet called Amos who lived in the mid-eighth century BCE, we could not be confident that he was speaking in the name of the god Yahweh, or what his social location was, or what his words were meant to do. For we do not know his society: it is not the biblical 'Israel'. For, from a literal, historical point of view, the words of this Amos are useless for his own time. Prediction of unavoidable doom is not especially useful. The only *point* of such 'prophecies' is as an implied warning to those of a later generation, which leads us to the conclusion that the earliest date for the writing down of the book is several decades after the prophet is supposed to have lived.<sup>354</sup>

We find here the same determination to replace the Bible’s perfectly credible pre-exilic scenario – the social activity of an actual eighth century figure – with a somewhat less credible (to put it politely) imagined post-exilic scenario – contemporary street theatre! Building on his usual presupposition – that biblical writers had no historical knowledge of pre-exilic situations – Davies urges us not to try to understand the Amos text as an account of something which actually took place. In this instance he justifies this stance by claiming that in the text as it stands (i.e. taking it literally as a story of something that happened) Amos’ words make no sense, since predicting unavoidable doom is not a useful exercise. He claims that the only way of making any real sense of the text is to see it as a warning to a future generation: i.e. that of the scribe himself. In other words, that this scribe, in writing, as Davies judges, *less than credibly* about an imaginary eighth century situation, shows that his interest is not in some historical matter but rather in establishing an important point about his own situation.

However, even if we grant for the moment that the situation which the Amos text describes is entirely imaginary, Davies is surely wrong in suggesting that it presents a less than credible picture. Of course, in order to understand this picture you have to view it from the proper perspective. As a ‘civilisation man’ Davies himself judges it in

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<sup>352</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 119-20

<sup>353</sup> Davies, of course, does not recognise any record of the existence of a Hebrew ‘revolution’ in the Bible.

<sup>354</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 123.

terms of its ‘usefulness’, the unavowed inference being that he takes it that we are all fundamentally committed to the idea that everything, *including the Hebrew ideology*, has to be judged in terms of its direct benefit to human civilisation. This, of course, is exactly what the scribes themselves, as ‘civilisation men’, would have done for they too, quite naturally, would have judged everything according to its direct usefulness in the running of their centrarchal organisation. From this ‘direct usefulness to civilisation’ view-point it is certainly true that Amos’ words make no sense, as Davies says. *But the text does not describe Amos’ words as coming from this civilisation quarter.* It describes them as coming from the very centre and heart of the Hebrew/marginal ideology, from the mouth of Yahweh himself – ‘Thus says the Lord’<sup>355</sup> – and as such their sense is not only profoundly meaningful but also decidedly unpalatable for all ‘civilisation people’, both ancient and modern.<sup>356</sup> *For from the marginals’ point of view the continuance and furtherance of centrarchal organisation is not the object of the exercise.* From the marginals’ point of view the only future for a ‘revolutionary’ community which has abandoned its ‘revolutionary’ ways and in defiance of its covenant commitment has adopted the ‘normal’ centrarchal outlook, lies in its demise ... strange as that may seem to civilisation people like ourselves. The truth seems to be as plain and brutal as that. But this marginal perspective is something to which Davies is completely blind. He tells us that we should *not* try to imagine Amos (this herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees) as a true-to-life spokesman of Yahweh who was sent packing by a true-to-life establishment priest (who was privileged in being in charge of the king’s sanctuary at Bethel).

Once again I must insist that my strictures against Davies’ approach are not in any way based on viewing this Amos text as an historical account of what took place in 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Israel. I am happy to accept *as a real possibility* that it is basically fiction – even though I find it makes profoundly good sense.<sup>357</sup> *But nothing will ever persuade me that its creators were the people whom Davies himself rightly sees as his intellectual forebears: scribal associates of the system of governance set up by the returning exiles during the Persian period. For everything that we know about such people (which isn’t much) shows that they were as little committed to the Hebrew ideology upon which it is clearly based as Davies himself seems to be.*

Given the enormity of the consequences which result from Davies’ facile, post-exilic reconstructions of the pre-exilic biblical material one has to ask oneself why he indulges in them? What we have to understand is that he finds himself as a biblical historian battling against a longstanding and pernicious tendency in scholarship: the habit of justifying biblical history simply because it cradles the biblical ideology. Like him I am all too aware that in the past historians have miserably failed to scrutinise the biblical data in terms of its historicity. The problem is that this awareness causes

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<sup>355</sup> Amos 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2.1, 2.4, 2.6; 3.1 (etc).

<sup>356</sup> Critics will of course argue that the text does not say that ‘the Lord’ Amos refers to is the god of the marginals. That it does not do so is not surprising since according to ancient practice a deity is defined not by adding such a label but by the activity attributed to him or her.

<sup>357</sup> Having accepted the possibility that the story of Amos is fictional I would still maintain that it *must* be based on something very like what is described. Further to this, my personal judgement is that it was *probably* based on a tradition containing some historical memory.

Davies to sacrifice the Hebrew ideology unjustifiably on the altar of historical research.<sup>358</sup> For, as I see it, the ‘revolutionary’ ideology contained within the biblical texts (which we will be extensively exploring in the next few chapters) is the phenomenon in the Bible most crucially in need of an historical explanation since without it the texts themselves are scarcely worth reading, let alone making of them a lifetime’s study.

You can see this whole problem raising its head in Davies’ argument with Gottwald<sup>359</sup> – one of a rare breed of scholars who makes a real, if in the end only partially successful attempt to take the Hebrew ideology seriously.<sup>360</sup> Davies accuses Gottwald of ‘using history as a mode of theology’ i.e. of allowing his interest in the Hebrew ideology to get in the way of a proper historical scepticism. Davies does not want to suppress an interest in biblical ideology altogether but suggests that it is important to conduct a parallel non-ideological investigation into the texts, where it is no longer important whether the subject matter turns out to be validated by history or to be of any ethical value. But the fact is that Gottwald’s sociological analysis of the early Israelite community, and the ideology associated with it *as this is presented in the biblical texts*, is not affected in the slightest by whether the society described was historical or of value. It is true that Gottwald clearly considers that the society depicted in the pre-exilic texts was both historical and of value but neither consideration affects in the slightest degree the validity of his analysis *of what the texts present*. Hence there is no good reason for Davies to ignore his results.<sup>361</sup>

### *Criticism of the Social Revolution Model*

Having exposed the hopeless inadequacy of Davis’ exile model we must now return to Gottwald and his social revolution thesis. As we have seen, a number of people have raised objections to this model, including Davies himself.<sup>362</sup> However, on examination, most of these criticisms simply served to show that the model, at least in

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<sup>358</sup> Davies himself would not admit to sacrificing the Hebrew ideology since he claims he cannot even find it in the texts!

<sup>359</sup> Davies, *In Search*, p. 15.

<sup>360</sup> See pp. 93-94 above.

<sup>361</sup> ‘While I admire some aspects of Gottwald’s work, it is hard to see how his own agenda can be pursued by those who arrive at different historical reconstructions.’ Davies, *In Search*, p. 15. n. 3.

<sup>362</sup> Ahlström complains that ‘Gottwald works hard to try to show that the Israelites were different from the Canaanites, obviously forgetting his own theory that the majority of them originally were Canaanites’ (Ahlström, *Ancient Palestine*, p. 345). But it doesn’t take a genius to see a difference between Canaanites who choose to withdraw from the Canaanite feudal system and join revolutionary Israel and Canaanites who fight Israel on behalf of the Canaanite feudal system, whatever you choose to call both parties (See Gottwald, *Quest*, p. 7). 109, , for his part, argues that the social revolution model is built on the notion that the Canaanite cities were powerful oppressors. He claims ‘it is a wild exaggeration to term these impoverished Canaanite mayors or headmen (*hazanuti*) an agrarian elite; and quite preposterous to picture the poor peasants rebelling against a powerful landed aristocracy (Redford, *Egypt*, p. 267f). However, the nature of a feudal enterprise is independent of its size and strength and, as Gottwald himself points out, when such an enterprise is put under pressure its intrinsic nature tends to harden rather than soften. Lenski prefers a frontier model, because it better explains Israel’s eventual reversion to the statist system and its abandonment of the tribal system but, as Gottwald points out, it is precisely because the frontier model does not account for a major social change that it is inadequate in dealing with Israel’s social revolution. (Gottwald, *Quest*, pp.10-11)

Gottwald's hands, is a far more subtle and nuanced affair than his critics seem to realise. That said there is, I believe, one very important and valid objection to be made. In centring attention on the notion of equality Gottwald's social revolution model wrongly pictures the movement from which Israel supposedly sprang as a normal class revolution of a peasant or proletarian kind which failed because its time had not yet come. As I see it this is most unlikely to have been the case, simply because all the texts, both biblical and extra-biblical, present these *'apiru'*/Hebrews not as members of a major exploited class, but rather as marginalised refugees.<sup>363</sup> To put the same point ideologically, Yahweh is not presented in the biblical texts<sup>364</sup> as a revolutionary 'Marxist' god<sup>365</sup> but as a 'revolutionary' Hebrew god. It is important to understand that this criticism is not a quibble about the precise social status of the people involved in the Hebrew 'revolution'. It is easy to fall into the trap of asking who are these so called marginals, expecting a reply in terms of some social definition of the lowest of the low: the lumpenproletariat perhaps.<sup>366</sup> But it is foolish to expect such a response because of course the whole point about the marginal phenomenon is that it involves people who are *excluded* from society and hence from all social categorisation as well. *The marginal is in fact potentially everybody and actually anybody who for one reason or another has been excluded, dumped or trashed.* In having no class to call their own, a movement of such people cannot conceivably be part of a natural evolution of society. For them there is no hope that sometime in the normal course of events their moment will come. Consequently, as far as this marginal phenomenon is concerned all words which are socially defined change their meaning and have to be put in inverted commas. For these Hebrew marginals there is no such thing as success or failure. There is only something which Paul speaks about as a hope against hope. Another way of putting this is to say that there never will be such a thing as a successful marginal 'revolution' which will finally bring to an end the marginals plight ... until the kingdom comes, which means that *this* is a problem which will *always* be with us. This fact is what, at the end of the day, finally divides Marxists from those who take their stand, as I do, with the 'revolutionary' biblical tradition.<sup>367</sup> Marxists see themselves as involved in the business of hastening on that series of revolutions which will eventually usher in the classless society, while those who stand in the tradition of the Hebrew 'revolution' see themselves as being involved in the endless, and, from the human point of view hopeless, struggle to usher in the kingdom of God.

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<sup>363</sup> Interestingly Manfred Weippert makes a very similar criticism of Mendenhall's peasant revolt model: 'In order to fit with his conversion hypothesis ... Mendenhall is obliged to lay too great an emphasis on the voluntary nature of the existence of the *'apiru*. It seems to me that entry into the category of classless individuals must normally, as the texts seem to indicate between the lines, have been experienced as misfortunes, just as the few cases in which we can observe the process of exclusion from 'middle-class society' external pressure is the cause, not free choice. Weippert *The Settlement*, p. 66

<sup>364</sup> There are, of course, no traces of an *'apiru* ideology in the extra-biblical texts.

<sup>365</sup> I use the term loosely!

<sup>366</sup> I have often found myself inadvertently doing this

<sup>367</sup> The usual practice has been to compare Christians with Marxists. I believe that such a comparison gives a very false picture of the actual situation since there is little evidence to suggest that when it comes down to it Christians as a whole stand effectively any closer to the 'revolutionary' biblical tradition than other people such as Jews and Socialists (including individual Marxists).

### *The Marginal 'Revolution' Model*

That completes our critical examination of the various working models designed to explain the rise of the biblical tradition. We will now venture to put forward our own model, whose capacity to illuminate will then be tested, in the following chapters, against the texts themselves. What we know from archaeological studies is that the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE saw a steady increase in population in central Palestine and the trans-Jordan area. We also know that the settlers' material culture was mainly Canaanite, which seems to suggest that the settlement was in the main the result of population movement within the area and not of incoming foreigners.<sup>368</sup> It is suspected that in certain areas these woodland zones had already been cleared for grazing and we know that they had been used for a considerable time as a haven for groups of 'apiru refugees from the cities. To this may be added the general opinion that the settlement was probably not the result of a voluntary, generalised, peasant revolt in the plains but rather of a multiplicity of factors set in train by the general breakdown of order in the whole region, forcing people for one reason or another to take to the hills. We therefore have to admit the likelihood that the settlement included different sorts of people coming from different directions as, for example Shasu nomads from the south, the only common factor being a shared distaste for the centrarchal system of governance which characterised the crumbling, erstwhile dominating order.

That is the situation we discover using extra-biblical material. What we find described in the Bible itself is a settlement of this same area of central Palestine during the selfsame period of history by the Israelite 'tribes'. These Israelites are depicted in the first instance as a group of escapee Hebrews from Egypt, led by a gifted ideologue

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<sup>368</sup> 'Archaeological work ... has demonstrated a sharp increase in small unwallled settlements in the central Palestinian hills during the twelfth and eleventh centuries. This process may have started already during the thirteenth century. The same early date seems to apply to settlement in the Madaba plain, on the Moab plateau in Jordan, and in parts of northern Jordan. This increase in settlements may support A. Alt's theory about a peaceful infiltration, but it does not give any clear evidence that the villages were built by a new ethnic group of people. The process of 'infiltration' was rather due to movements within the country and was not caused only by indigenous immigrant peoples. This assumption can be supported by the archaeological remains from these new villages, which show that the material culture of the new villages was mainly Canaanite. G.E. Mendenhall's hypothesis about a withdrawal to the hills is thus to be taken seriously. People may have moved up from the coastal areas, the lowlands, and valleys to the wooded regions in the mountains in order to escape the problems of war and devastation, taxes and corvée. An investigation of the burial systems supports such a theory. As mentioned before, during the Late Bronze period the central hills had only a few settlements. The population of the highlands may have been mainly shepherders. Knowing that the wooded highlands had always been a place of refuge, it is likely that peoples moved to these areas from the north, the south, and the (south) east. In other words, both indigenous people and foreigners probably settled in the hills. The settlers probably also included some nomadic clans (the Shasu of the Egyptian texts). With the collapse of the socio-political system during the upheavals at the end of the Late Bronze period, including the fall of the Egyptian empire with its control over Palestine and the trade routes, several nomadic clans changed their lifestyle and settled in the hills. Whether a change in the climate or a disaster like a plague could have played a role is impossible to determine. As far as can be said, the population increase arose not only out of a withdrawal from the urban and agricultural areas in the lowlands; nomads, bandits, refugees and immigrants from the north must also be taken into consideration. That the new settlers of the highlands were mainly Semites can, however, be concluded from the names of the new villages as we know them from the Old Testament. Most of these names are West Semitic. Ahlström, *Ancient Palestine*, pp. 349-50

named Moses. When you put the extra-biblical and the biblical material together you can't help admiring how well they generally fit. However, we have to remind ourselves once again that such a fit cannot of itself be taken as indicating that the biblical account is in any way based on historical memory. Given the six hundred odd years between these supposed events and their final appearance in written form in the Persian period a good deal of scepticism, at the very least, is in order. So the question is this: has any viable alternative scenario, encompassing the assured evidence gleaned both from the bible itself and extra biblical material, been advanced by any modern historian to explain what we find in the Bible? Reinhard G. Kratz has recently attempted to provide such a tableau.<sup>369</sup>

### *The Bible as Resulting from Scribal Culture?*

In the very first line of his article Kratz sets parameters which show he believes historians are under an obligation to understand the Bible as emanating from Israelite-Judean scribal culture.<sup>370</sup> Given this presupposition he takes as the starting point of his enquiry the rise of the monarchy in Israel and Judah, having no regard to anything which might have taken place prior to this set up.<sup>371</sup> Kratz sees his task as to try to explain how *the biblical tradition* developed from out of *the scribal culture of Israel* which itself was the product of the rise of monarchy and the state. Clearly he understands this development as a sort of metamorphosis for he speaks about it as 'a transformation into another kind' which 'can barely be explained historically'.<sup>372</sup> Though Kratz clearly feels we are not in a position to give a straightforward historical explanation of this development he maintains it is possible, by comparing the extra-biblical *epigraphic remains* with *the literary remains* found within the Old Testament, to identify 'the stages by which the moves to the growth of the Old Testament were made'.<sup>373</sup> Using such a technique Kratz believes he can identify five stages in the generative process. However, since these stages are successive and since our interest is in understanding the mechanism driving the process as a whole, we will concentrate our attention on the first stage which he labels: From Prophets of Salvation to Prophets of Disaster.

Kratz begins by declaring that the main difference between the *scribal culture* as manifest in epigraphic remains and the *tradition* witnessed to in the Bible is in 'the picture of God in the Old Testament'. He claims that whereas scribal culture describes a national god who has a symbiotic relationship with his worshiping community, biblical tradition presents a picture of a god who has no natural affinity with his worshipers but

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<sup>369</sup> In his article *The Growth of the Old Testament* in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* edited by J. W. Rogerson and Judeth M. Lieu (Oxford: OUP, 2006) pp.459-488.

<sup>370</sup> 'The growth of the Old Testament presupposes the Israelite-Judean scribal culture.' Kratz, *Oxford* p. 459.

<sup>371</sup> 'As in the whole of the ancient Near East, the scribal culture in Israel and Judah developed with the rise of the monarchy. The economy of the court and the temple, as well as that of trade, made the establishment of a bureaucracy necessary.' Kratz, *Oxford* p. 459.

<sup>372</sup> Kratz, *Oxford* p. 468.

<sup>373</sup> 'By means of the differences between the epigraphic and the literary remains of the ancient scribal culture, one can none the less identify the stages by which the moves to the growth of the Old Testament were made.' Kratz, *Oxford* p. 468.

who simply chooses them and in so doing establishes an exclusive relationship that obliges them to respond to him positively by committing themselves to the conditions he lays down. Kratz maintains that ‘as far as we can see, this picture of God has its roots in the prophetic tradition’ and he sees it both as bearing ‘the marks of a religion of revelation’, and as coming ‘from theological reflection’. But what exactly constituted the revelation Kratz speaks about, which subsequently set in train theological reflection upon it? Kratz has no doubts on this score:

The cause of this theological new interpretation of the prophetic oracle is not difficult to discern from the prophecy of disaster. It is the destruction of Samaria and the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE which also threatened Judah at least in 701, and caused the guardians of the tradition to think of the relationship between YHWH and Israel beyond the limits of merely political concerns. The same situation repeated itself about a hundred years later in connection with the fall of Jerusalem in 597 to 587 BCE.<sup>374</sup>

The net result of this revelation and the subsequent prophetic theological reflection it brought about was, according to Kratz, ‘a change in the picture of God, in that [prophetic interpretation] declared YHWH, the national God of Israel and Judah, to be the enemy of the two monarchies, and turned the previous court or cult prophets into prophets of disaster, who were committed not to God and to the king, but solely and only to YHWH’.<sup>375</sup>

But does this general scenario stand scrutiny? The fact is that Israel and Judah were far from being the only communities to suffer the ignominy of military defeat and national humiliation. Such a situation was a common occurrence in the ancient Near East. However, as far as we know, they were the only ones to conclude after due reflection *that they had been punished by their own god* leading them, so Kratz supposes, to come to believe all the things he details. This being the case, an explanation of the biblical tradition simply cannot be based on the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem since what stands in need of an explanation is why those who created this tradition reflected on the defeat of their communities in a way that was totally at variance with the way in which people habitually reflected in such circumstances. To do him justice Kratz covers himself in this regard by admitting from the outset that he is not in a position to offer a truly satisfactory historical explanation for the rise of the biblical tradition. However, what intrigues me is why this is the case, a subject, I note, he refrains from discussing. For my part I cannot help remarking that in the general manner of liberal scholars *Kratz offers an analysis entirely devoid of ideological considerations*. He correctly searches for the significant difference between the scribal culture and the biblical tradition in the contrasting portraits of Yahweh each of them produce but his actual descriptions of these portraits contain no word of ideology even though he readily admits that the creators of the biblical tradition seem to have been in some way outsiders, in striking contrast with their scribal counterparts:

... scribes were trained in schools, and as a rule were active in state positions, whereas the biblical writings are somewhat reserved in their view of the court and the temple. The likely conclusion is that the authors and copiers of biblical books consisted of people who came from the scribal schools and the higher ranks of administration, but who had distanced themselves either privately or publicly from these and had gone their own ways.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Kratz, *Oxford* p. 470.

<sup>375</sup> Kratz, *Oxford* p. 469.

<sup>376</sup> Kratz, *Oxford* p. 460.



The fact is, of course, that if some people within Israel and Judah, after due reflection, came to a completely unprecedented conclusion regarding what had happened to their communities it could only have been as a result of their having a very unusual ideological point of view. Kratz admits to the presence of something unique within the biblical texts. However, he maintains that it wasn't an ideological factor present from the very beginning but rather something which mysteriously arose out of the general process as time went by, how he really cannot say!

... the biblical [writers] took over the practices, knowledge, and literary remains of the scribes. At the same time they pioneered with what they took over, or produced independently on the basis of it, a very particular way that was also unique in the whole of the ancient Near East. The genre and the content of the biblical books burst the limits of the usual praxis of the scribes.<sup>377</sup>

Because Kratz cannot admit what surely must be obvious to most people – that from the very beginning the biblical writers were working with (or given the possibility of revisionism even quite possibly against) a very unusual world-view which had materialised out of events quite possibly pre-dating the establishment of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah – he has no way of adequately explaining the salient features of their writings, as for example their noticeable reserve in regard to the Temple and court.<sup>378</sup> But what is far worse, he cannot offer a credible explanation of the genesis of the movement the biblical writers appear to report on, and in themselves in part constituted, except for a possible insinuation (understandably unvoiced) that it came as a result of a revelation parachuted from on high. Such a notion must, of course, be strenuously resisted. So, given that we find ourselves without a viable explanation other than the one to which the Bible apparently witnesses, we will for the moment suspend disbelief and see what happens if we read the biblical texts as some sort of memory, however historically vague and to our civilisation tastes inadequate, of an actual marginal 'revolution'.

Given that the whole point of a model is to encapsulate a scenario it may well be objected that the concept of a marginal 'revolution' is so ambiguous as to be useless in this domain. What after all is a marginal 'revolution'? However, I insist on putting forward this model with no excuses since it seems to me that the very nature of this particular 'ancient Israel' phenomenon is that it is unique, and hence indefinable apart from itself, there being no category into which it can properly be fitted. In fact the word 'revolution' is put thus in inverted commas because it is at best only an approximate description. If you ask me for an accurate description I can only refer you to what Mary is said to have been describing in the Magnificat:

He has shown strength with his arm,  
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
he hath put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;  
he hath filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Kratz, *Oxford* p. 459.

<sup>378</sup> See immediately above.

<sup>379</sup> Lk 1.51-53.

I don't know what *you* would call the process she is talking about here. Though it is certainly not a class revolution it does appear to be something quite similar. I call it a 'revolution' and, let me be clear, I do not see it as an eschatological event which historians can properly ignore. On the contrary I see it as an historical phenomenon that had its beginnings sometime, somewhere, and which continued to reverberate in history right up to our present day, even though academic historians, as a social entity radically at odds with the 'Apiru/Hebrews, do their best not to acknowledge it.

## Chapter 7.

### **The God of the Marginals: The Hebrews' Ruling Political Idea**

In a community's ideology the sophistication of its *technical* ideas is indicative of its stage of development whereas the quality of its *existential* ideas are indicative of its group character – the feature which interests us. Consequently we will only concern ourselves with the ideas situated at the highest existential level of the technical/existential continuum. In chapter 4 we saw how these existential concepts are influenced by two defining ideas:

- 1) The ruling political idea: which colours the ideology as a whole by determining how the human power/creativity question is to be handled.
- 2) The ruling religious idea: which determines which hidden-grain model is used in conceiving the whole scenario.

It is with the political idea that we shall be dealing in this chapter. However, before attempting to identify Israel's ruling political idea I want first to clarify how we should understand its provenance. There are, as I see it, three possibilities:

- 1) Ideas may be projections: the result of a community's rationalisation of its interests.
- 2) Ideas may stem from genuine insight: the result of the community's most gifted individuals' penetration of the hidden nature of the universe.
- 3) Ideas may stem from godly revelation and be the result of faith.

These possibilities are not necessarily incompatible or contradictory and I believe that a place should be found for all of them. However, it is important to understand just what this place is, in each case.

It seems irrefutable that existential ideas are projections since they are obviously radically influenced by the position from which life is viewed and experienced. It is easy for a disinterested observer to see this is the case. For interested parties the position is less obvious. In this regard Gottwald's strictures against the idealism of John Bright seem to me entirely justified.<sup>380</sup> On a number of occasions and in different ways Jesus pointed out that the destitute were fortunate and the rich condemned in advance – not because of their moral qualities but simply because of where their feet were placed. His understanding would seem to be that the destitute *naturally* find themselves positioned to get a clear vision of the Kingdom, the view of the rich being just as *naturally* blocked.

However, existential ideas are not just rationalisations. They are also, at least to an extent, the result of perception, understanding and discovery. That said, genius and

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<sup>380</sup> See above p. 61. n. 195.

piety can never be a substitute for having one's feet in the right place. Perhaps for most of us this is the hardest lesson we have to learn in life. For no amount of piety, study, discipline and practice in humility can make up for the clarity of vision afforded by solidarity with the outcasts. At the end of the day it is where you have your feet that counts most. Genius can only *clarify* the view obtained from the position afforded by the placement of the feet.

It also seems to me clear that metacosmological ideas are not adequately described as either projections or as insights so that I find myself occasionally forced, almost against my better judgement, to talk in terms of revelation.<sup>381</sup> However, even when occasionally forced to do so I have to admit that since the metacosmic is by definition amenable only to faith it can leave no verifiable traces of its passage. Thus, when it comes to the business of trying to determine the *historical* provenance of even metacosmological ideas I am obliged to consider the category of revelation as impertinent. Since in the following analysis I am dealing with the Hebrew ideology as a historical phenomenon *every idea* I find within it will have to be justified, at least in principle, as stemming from Israel's socio-political matrix. In this regard Bright's comment that 'Israel's notion of God was unique in the ancient world, and a phenomenon that defies rational explanation'<sup>382</sup> simply won't do, especially in a book entitled 'A History of Israel'.

In Christendom biblical ideas were for a long time regarded as normative, a fact which paradoxically provided a strong impetus to keep the Bible out of politics and, more pertinently, politics out of the Bible. As a result a well established if somewhat bizarre belief grew up that ancient Israel was not concerned with political matters. As I have previously pointed out such an understanding is given superficial plausibility by the fact that the biblical writers do not express themselves in what we would consider clear political terminology. However, the cover is blown as soon as it comes to be realised that none of Israel's competitors expressed their views in clear political terms either. Without exception they manifested their political convictions in the same way as Israel herself - in allegory, myth and legend.

Of course, scholars have no difficulty in recognising the political convictions of Israel's neighbours. Only in Israel's case do we find some of them still arguing that political ideas are unimportant to the point of being virtually non-existent. Israel's political ideas were certainly starkly different from those of her neighbours but that she had political ideas and thought them profoundly significant should in the first instance be taken for granted by any self-respecting historian. That so many of the Judeo-Christian variety have sought in the past to deny such an obvious truth suggests to me that they, rather than the ancient Israelites, are the ones who seek to downgrade the political sphere.

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<sup>381</sup> I use the word on this particular occasion to mean an essentially mysterious communication from the beyond as, for example, when God addressed Elijah in a still small voice (I Kings 19.12) or Job out of the whirlwind (Job 38).

<sup>382</sup> Bright, *History*, p148 / 132

*The Biblical ideology as Egalitarianism over against Hierarchy?*

Since Bright is one of those who find the political domain of little significance we shall look, in the first instance, to Gottwald for guidance. However, his work too presents a problem for although he examines the political *structures* of early Israel at great length he has very little to say about her political *ideology*: so-called Yahwism. The reason for this is of course that he is wedded to the materialist understanding: that ideology is but a reflection of socio-political reality. Because of this he hesitates to discuss Yahwism in its own right, presumably for fear of endowing it with a reality that in fact belongs to the socio-political matrix from which he believes it stemmed. The only thing which is clear is that whenever he finds space, for the briefest moment, and against his better judgement, to speak directly of the actual character of Israel's ideology, the idea he invariably has in mind is *egalitarianism*.<sup>383</sup>

As I have already said I do not find any evidence for egalitarianism v hierarchy thinking within the biblical texts. Of course it is easy to see why people assume it was the way in which ancient peoples thought, since it is clear the biblical writers had experience of what we term 'vertical' and 'horizontal' relationships: between king and subject on the one hand and between two free subjects on the other. This makes it all too easy for people today to conclude that biblical writers operated on the basis of the hierarchical/egalitarian antinomy which we take so much for granted.

Let me be clear about what I am saying here. If I hesitate to use the word equality in connection with Israel it is not because such words, or their equivalents, never figure in the biblical texts for, as I have already pointed out, that proves nothing. Indeed, if we do manage to determine the dominant political idea the biblical writers were using and give it a name, we should no more expect to find that name itself within the texts than hierarchy or egalitarianism. Again, if I hesitate to use the word equality in connection with Israel it is not because when Gottwald, for example, does so that I fail to identify the attributes he is referring to and conclude that he is simply making things up. Rather it is because I see hierarchy/equality as representing *our way of thinking* and not that of the biblical writers.

This being so I have no serious objections to sociologists classifying Mesopotamian political *structures* as hierarchical and Israelite political *structures* as egalitarian since in doing so they are presumably simply describing how such *structures* operated. What I object to is any pretence that Mesopotamian *ideologies* were overtly hierarchical or that Yahwism was overtly egalitarian, since that is to suggest that people were in the

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<sup>383</sup> 'In the case of Yahwistic Israel we see fully formed precisely the marks of a conscious, organised, broad-scale social egalitarian movement which were lacking amidst all the Amarna unrest. In Israel, antifeudal sentiments and protest has become antifeudal and pro-egalitarian ideology and social organisation.' Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 489. See also p. 614: 'Deity and cult supported conceptually and institutionally the popular equality of all males as members of extended families, an equality evident both in the cult assembly proper and in all segments of communal life in which the ultimate symbolic attribution of sovereignty and leadership was reserved to the deity ...' and p. 647: 'When religion is thus hypothesised as the symbolic side of social struggle, it may be said of Yahwism that at a certain point in the widening and deepening struggle of social groups antagonistic towards the dominant Canaanite system and converging towards one another, the consciousness of struggle in the shaping of concrete egalitarian social relations crystallised in the ideology of Yahwism.'

habit of using our ‘up and down’ way of thinking – which, according to the evidence in their texts, I don’t believe was the case. As I see it there is little if anything in the Jewish Bible to make us suppose that the Israelites were specifically concerned about people being unequal or were demanding equality.

Unlike Gottwald, Mendenhall is perfectly happy to discuss ideologies rather than just structures alone.<sup>384</sup> According to him religion and politics are reciprocals<sup>385</sup> so that in a community where politics is weak religion will be strong and vice versa. In this way he is able to speak of Israel’s ideological struggle with Late Bronze Age society as religion pitted against politics.<sup>386</sup> Thus he sees religion and politics as occupying the selfsame space in an ideology, each as the negation of the other. Consequently, as he sees it there can be no distinguishing in general between ancient and modern states, using a religious/political divide.<sup>387</sup> Inescapably therefore, one concludes that for Mendenhall a healthy state means a religious state and a corrupt state a political one. This explains why it is, when he comes to speak about the content of Israel’s ideology, that he describes it negatively as anti-political, anti-state, anti-bureaucratic, and anti-dominance.<sup>388</sup> On the other hand he describes Israel’s ideology positively as religious, as ethical, and as covenantal love.<sup>389</sup>

What can we extract from this in terms of a dominant political idea for Israel? Unfortunately most of the content is unusable since it consists of a *discrediting* of political ideas and their *evacuation* from the ideological sphere.<sup>390</sup> If we ignore this

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<sup>384</sup> ‘... the fundamental problem (with the Bronze Age societies of the ancient Near East) was ideological - the political theology which we tend to discuss as ‘religion’ these days ... The fundamental solution was also ideological, and it is this which originally constituted the biblical faith, the introduction of monotheism, and the elevation of ethic to the place of permanent concern.’ Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p. 223

<sup>385</sup> ‘To return to our main theme of religion and politics as reciprocals ...’ Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p. 214

<sup>386</sup> ‘The starting point of politics is the concern for power, but the whole theme of early biblical history - and a recurrent theme throughout - is the rejection of power.’ Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p.195. See also ‘If the very heart and centre of religion is “allegiance,” which the Bible terms “love,” religion and covenant become virtually identical. Out of this flows nearly the whole of those aspects of biblical faith that constitute impressive contrasts to the ancient paganism of the ancient Near Eastern world, ...’ p.16

<sup>387</sup> ‘If we label as ‘religion’ the ideologies and behaviour of ancient human beings that are clearly determined by the conviction that the king (who is the state) and his political power are ultimate manifestations of unseen, transcendent factors that determine the future and total well-being of society, why should there be any hesitation to classify under the same label similar ideologies and behaviour patterns of the modern world.’ Mendenhall *Tenth*, p.199

<sup>388</sup> ‘...the purpose of the revolution was the creation of a condition of peace in which every man could sit under his own fig tree and his own grapevine, doing “what was right in his own eyes” - a description of self-determination and freedom from interference or harassment by the king’s bureaucrats or military autocracy. In fact, the latter phrase is used in the Late Bronze Age to describe the freedom of choice and action that was then regarded as a proper prerogative of an independent “great king,” over against the status of his vassals, who were not thus free agents.’ Mendenhall *Tenth*, p. 27

<sup>389</sup> ‘If the kings of the Late Bronze Age regarded their dominions as something delegated to them from the divine world, it needed only the introduction of an ethic to see that the divine world itself could rule without the extravagantly expensive prestige symbols of the temple, palace, and military establishment of the kings. The Mosaic covenant provided this ethical system, and created a new people out of the ashes of the Late Bronze Age cultures.’ Mendenhall *Tenth*, p.173

<sup>390</sup> ‘The covenant structure at Sinai is of course a classic example (of the adaptation of formal symbols and ideas), but by the simple process of transference from the realm of politics and power structures to the realm of religion and personal relationships and ethic, (the presentation) became radically different and functioned in a radically different way.’ Mendenhall *Tenth*, p 203

political phobia, all that remains is Mendenhall's 'anti-dominance' and 'egalitarian society under the Kingdom of God' theme. So in spite of all his efforts Mendenhall takes us no further forward than the hierarchical/egalitarian divide we rejected 'way back with Crossan. Clearly we confront a major problem in identifying the key political idea in the biblical ideology!

However, we have not wasted our time in studying Mendenhall's work for we have learnt something extremely important: that we cannot answer the question about Israel's defining political idea by offering a religious response. Mendenhall's American Luddite attitude to the state makes this abundantly clear. His 'pioneer' model - everyone sitting under their fig tree and vine - is based on the rather quaint understanding that the state is fundamentally different from other human social structures in being intrinsically restricting. In fact, of course, in terms of its political organisation the state operates no differently from the village. This too has organisational structures that inevitably infringe the personal liberty of the individual. Indeed we can take the model back further still and argue that the decision to live in the same house with another individual teaches the lesson that all social organisation implies an infringement of personal liberty and that it is an illusion to believe mankind can live without it. One of my French Maoist friends made this unforgettably plain to me when he declared that there was nothing more political than the way in which two people make love. All human relations are intrinsically political and there is no way in which one can avoid the question as to the right way of using one's power and creativity in treating the other. It is no good saying one must love the other unless one makes it quite clear what, *ideologically speaking*, this love means, that is, in terms of how it is considered human power and creativity are to be wielded.<sup>391</sup>

Mendenhall is, of course, aware that love needs to be defined:

In biblical thought love is only a word with no reference to reality apart from those manifestations in human experience and motivation - things that happen to us on the one hand, and overt actions, behaviour of human beings on the other, which are recognised as worthy of the word label. It is clear that in biblical usage love is first of all a label for the fact that persons have established and continue to maintain personal relationships with others, in which the concern for the well-being of the other is recognised as an obligation that takes precedence over other concerns such as the exercise of power or profiting at the other's expense.<sup>392</sup>

But you will notice that once again he solves the problem with his reciprocal relationship between the ethical (the concern for the other's well being) and the political (profiting at the other's expense). This is just a refined way of brushing aside the political question: a clever means of refusing to answer it in its own terms. He never bothers to consider what are the ethical considerations involved in our profiting at other people's expense even though it is something all human beings, including the best of us, do all of the time. This will not do. The political domain of human experience and endeavour has its own specific importance and an analysis that refuses to deal with it is guilty of hiding from reality.

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<sup>391</sup> The reader will note that I like to speak of human power *and creativity* rather than of human power alone. This is because I see it as wrong to think of power simply negatively as Mendenhall and others seem to do.

<sup>392</sup> Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p. 214

So the question is this: if Gottwald is right to maintain that *Yahwism* was linked with what sociologists today classify as *egalitarian social structures* what was the fundamental political idea that actually forged this link if, as I believe, it could not have been *the egalitarian idea* itself?

### *The God of the Marginals as the Hebrew Ideology*

In the early texts of Exodus dealing with the liberation struggle in Egypt<sup>393</sup> the children of Israel are sometimes referred to by another name: they are called Hebrews. As I have already said<sup>394</sup> there is now considerable agreement that the words ‘Apiru and Hebrew are the same.’<sup>395</sup> This being the case it would obviously make sense to see the Israelites as marginals and if this is correct we should then expect to find, here in the Jewish Bible, texts defending the marginal ideology, miraculously preserved against all expectation. It is the primary thesis of this book that *Israel’s defining political idea was that her god Yahweh is god of the Hebrews, which is to say the god of the marginals, the one who by his very nature sides with those excluded from centrarchal society, or what we would call civilisation.*

‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’<sup>396</sup>

In my view this idea is the bedrock of both the Jewish Bible and the New Testament. It is the idea which on being unpacked can be seen to have indelibly coloured all of Israel’s major existential concepts including those described as religious. Consequently I use this god-of-the-marginals idea as a label for the Hebrew ideology itself, on the understanding that the ruling political idea in any ideology can properly be used to stand for the ideology as a whole. It is important to emphasise that the god-of-the-marginals thesis does not *depend* on the hypothesis that Hebrew = ‘Apiru = Marginal. In fact the equation of the names and their significance should in the first instance only be seen as providing good reason to search in this direction. The proof of the thesis, if it comes, will be found in the texts themselves and not simply in this fragile connection.

### *The evidence for the god of the marginals in the name Hebrew*

It is a curious fact that the term Hebrew is used very rarely in the Jewish Bible and that even then it sometimes seems to appear accidentally,<sup>397</sup> or as a deliberate archaism.<sup>398</sup> If we set aside these instances there are only two sets of occasions where the term is used: first in the texts concerning Israel’s stay in Egypt (seven dealing with Joseph and thirteen with Moses), and again in narratives of Saul’s wars against the Philistines (seven). In other words, as R. de Vaux pointed out, the word is only used in texts that are concerned with periods of Israel’s history preceding the Davidic monarchy.

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<sup>393</sup> Ex 1 - 15:21

<sup>394</sup> See p. 86 above.

<sup>395</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 401, de Vaux, *Early*, p. 213f, Bright, *History* p. 34

<sup>396</sup> Gen 15.1.

<sup>397</sup> Deut 15:12 and Jer 34:9

<sup>398</sup> Gen 14:13, Exod 21:2, and Jonah 1:9. Bright, *History*, p. 211-12



It is clear that in the Exodus texts the word ‘Hebrew’ is only ever used to designate human individuals *in the terms of the centrarchival world*, that is to say to state a matter as the Pharaoh himself would see it. In this way it is used:

- by Pharaoh himself:  
 “When you serve as midwives to the Hebrew women, ...”<sup>399</sup>  
 The Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrew you shall ...”<sup>400</sup>
- to describe the Israelite midwives in the presence of Pharaoh:  
 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives ...<sup>401</sup>
- by the Israelite midwives speaking before Pharaoh:  
 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “... the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women ...”<sup>402</sup>
- by Pharaoh’s daughter:  
 When she opened it and saw the child and lo the babe was crying, she took pity on him and said,  
 “This is one of the Hebrew children ...”<sup>403</sup>
- by Moses’ sister when speaking to Pharaoh’s daughter:  
 Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women .....?<sup>404</sup>
- by God when telling Moses how to speak before Pharaoh:  
 and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us...”<sup>405</sup>  
 And you shall say to him, “The Lord the God of the Hebrews ...”<sup>406</sup>  
 Go to the Pharaoh and say to him, “Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews...”<sup>407</sup>  
 Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and say to him, “Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews...”<sup>408</sup>
- by Moses before Pharaoh:  
 Then they said “The God of the Hebrews has met with us ...”<sup>409</sup>  
 So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and said to him, “Thus says the Lord the God of the Hebrews...”<sup>410</sup>
- to describe an incident between an Egyptian master and an Israelite slave:  
 He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew...<sup>411</sup>
- to describe an incident between two Israelites in the light of the above incident:  
 behold two Hebrews were struggling together ...<sup>412</sup>

In the same vein the word Hebrew is *never* used to describe events *in the terms of the marginals*:

- To speak of Israel from Israel’s point of view:  
 And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage and cried out for help ...<sup>413</sup>
- To speak of Israel from Yahweh’s point of view:  
 And God saw the people of Israel and knew their condition<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Ex 1:15  
<sup>400</sup> Ex 1:22  
<sup>401</sup> Ex 1:15  
<sup>402</sup> Ex 1:19  
<sup>403</sup> Ex 2:6  
<sup>404</sup> Ex 2:7  
<sup>405</sup> Ex 3:18  
<sup>406</sup> Ex 7:16  
<sup>407</sup> Ex 9:1  
<sup>408</sup> Ex 9:13  
<sup>409</sup> Ex 5:3  
<sup>410</sup> Ex 10:3  
<sup>411</sup> Ex 2:11  
<sup>412</sup> Ex 2:13  
<sup>413</sup> Ex 2: 23

- To speak of Israel from Moses' point of view:  
Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them ..."<sup>415</sup>
- To speak of Yahweh from Yahweh's point of view:  
"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."<sup>416</sup>

The four texts from the Joseph story and the seven texts from the 'Saul and the Philistines' narratives follow this general rule, with one notable exception which I can only explain as a scribal blunder:

And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land saying, "Let the Hebrews hear"<sup>417</sup>

This rule of itself indicates that the word 'Hebrew', exactly like the word 'apiru, was a centrarchal (i.e. civilisation) term designating people who had for one reason or another become excluded from human society or trashed (whether or not that was in fact how it was derived); that it was in the first instance a technical term used by the Egyptians and their lackeys to refer to those marginals living within their sphere of influence. Quite naturally the term was thereafter adopted by these marginal Israelites to refer to themselves *when speaking in the context of their Egyptian masters*.<sup>418</sup> In such cases the term itself maintained its character as a description of how the centrarchs thought of them rather than of how the Israelites thought of themselves.<sup>419</sup> The presence of this term 'Hebrew', at this critical juncture in Israel's recitation of her '*heilsgeschichte*', is the closest we ever come to finding a clear marginal ideological signature in the Hexateuchal texts: a precise indication of the sort of political spectacles we should wear when reading the Yahwist's stories, and indeed the Bible as a whole.

#### *The evidence for the god of the marginals in the Exodus Texts*

Let me begin by making it very clear that nothing that I write should be taken as indicating that I attribute historicity or a lack of it to these texts; this is a matter we will leave to later. I will examine these texts adopting my usual methodology, selecting in this instance the work of George. W. Coats to represent present day, scholarly findings.<sup>420</sup> In my usual manner I will closely scrutinise this with the intention not only of gleaning from it what can be learned about these texts but also of identifying the extent to which Coats' presentation and arguments ideologically falsify them.

It will, of course, naturally be asked how I propose to identify Coats' ideological 'misrepresentations' of the texts, given that it is my aim to use the texts to demonstrate the god-of-the-marginals ideology. Surely I can only identify misrepresentations after I

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<sup>414</sup> Ex 2:25. See also Ex 3:9,10,14,18 etc.

<sup>415</sup> Ex 3:13

<sup>416</sup> Ex 3:6. See also Ex 3:16 etc.

<sup>417</sup> 1 Sam 13:3

<sup>418</sup> I am not implying here that what we have in the Bible is verbatim reports of things that actually happened in the last quarter of the second millennium BCE. All I am saying is that the Bible is here self-consciously using a civilisation term of disparagement to speak of the Israelites, which is to say a term which no Israelite would naturally have used when talking about people within his or her community.

<sup>419</sup> There are contemporary instances of such intentionally derogatory appellations being adopted by the marginalised themselves, for example the Paris students in May 1968 who chanted against the French authorities "We are all German Jews".

<sup>420</sup> Coats George EW, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988)

have independently ascertained the texts' ideological content. We encountered this same problem of the circular argument (viewing your own reflection in the bottom of a well) in my previous volume, in connection with the identification of Jesus' fundamental strategy. There I needed to find some way of identifying this strategy independently of scholarship's findings, because I found myself up against the views of twentieth century academics who had advocated any number of alternative, proactive strategies to fit the bill. This made it absolutely necessary for me to establish my counter-proposal of a reactive strategy without any recourse to their work. In the case of the biblical ideology the situation is quite different for I do not find myself up against any firm proposal as to what this Hebrew ideology is.<sup>421</sup> Indeed, if scholarship has a current position on the subject it is that there is no such thing, the belief being that the Bible sets forth a number of conflicting ideological positions. The fact is, of course, that when it comes to ideological matters there is no use in relying on scholarship since ideological awareness does not materialise out of scientifically acquired knowledge but rather from an experience of life. This means that every individual of the human species stands before ideological matters on an equal footing with every other, regardless of when he/she lived. So when it comes to appreciating the ideology of an ancient text, once one has managed to surmount the technical problems of translation, cultural difference and changing mind-sets, the scholar is in no better position to ascertain the truth than anyone else. Indeed, if it is the case that the biblical ideology is that of the god of the marginals then the only thing that will aid a proper identification of it in a given text is a life of radical solidarity with those whom civilisation has excluded. This is not something for which biblical academics are particularly noted and, let us be clear, there is an enormous difference between such radical solidarity and charity since the former depends on a willingness to sacrifice privilege and the latter doesn't! In short, when it comes to the business of identifying the ideology of a biblical text (after all the above technical considerations have been resolved) we all find ourselves quite inevitably *on our own* and not only that but also *in the position of being ourselves judged by what we judge*. So I will accept no one's instruction on what the biblical ideology is – and certainly no scholar's – and neither should anyone else.

a) Moses as a baby in a basket.

These are the introductory words of the Legend of Sargon I, conqueror of Mesopotamia in the 24th Century B.C.E.

Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I.  
 My mother was a changeling, my father I knew not.  
 The brother(s) of my father loved the hills.  
 My city is Azupiranu, which is situated on the banks of the Euphrates.  
 My changeling mother conceived me, in secret she bore me.  
 She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid.  
 She cast me into the river which rose not over me.  
 The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water.  
 Akki the drawer of water lifted me out as he dipped his ewer.  
 Akki the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me.

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<sup>421</sup> I talk about the Hebrew ideology rather than the biblical ideology because the Bible itself contains both 'revolutionary' and revisionist texts. In point of fact, of course, even these revisionist texts witness to the 'revolutionary' ideology in their attempts to suppress it, making it perfectly proper in my opinion to talk about the biblical ideology meaning the Hebrew or marginal ideology. However, for the sake of clarity I have preferred to talk about the Hebrew ideology rather than the biblical ideology.

Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener.  
While I was gardener, Ishtar granted me her love,  
And for four and [ ] years I exercised kingship.<sup>422</sup>

In the beginning of Exodus chapter 2 the Yahwist describes the birth of Moses, the future Hebrew leader, in strikingly similar terms. This would suggest he intended to invite a comparison between Moses and Sargon.<sup>423</sup> Since Sargon was the model of the centrarchal hero it is natural to suppose that the Yahwist wanted the reader to find in his work a portrait of the contrasting Hebrew/marginal hero. George W. Coats recognizes the striking parallels between the Sargon and Moses birth narratives but specifically rejects this comparison, preferring instead to view Moses in the light of the politically neutral ‘folk hero’.<sup>424</sup> If Coats dismisses the comparison it is because he believes Sargon fails to qualify as a folk hero. By definition, a folk hero has to be a local lad and Sargon was a foreigner adopted by a community *which was not his own*.<sup>425</sup>

Coats’ basic hypothesis is that what we have in the Moses texts are two sources knitted together: ‘The Moses narratives, structured as heroic saga, merge[d] with narrative tradition about Yahweh’s mighty acts, structured around confessional themes’. Though this hypothesis is illuminating, Coats’ work on the Moses narratives is fatally flawed because of his studied, apolitical approach. In ignoring the Yahwist’s highly charged ideological comparison of Moses and Sargon, Coats fails to give due weight to the political qualities of the ‘hero of the marginals’ which I believe the texts themselves are expressly designed to highlight – and, no, I am not here surreptitiously breathing into the texts what I later want to find, for the baby Moses is specifically described as being a Hebrew (i.e. marginal) child.<sup>426</sup>

In the extant Sargon material the king is portrayed as ruthlessly opportunistic yet highly respectful towards the centrarchal ideology in place. As Coats says, he appears to have been a foreigner of humble origins whose family came originally from the northern hills of Mesopotamia. He managed by some means to find employment as a personal servant to the King of Kish. There he instigated a coup against his master and went on to conquer all Sumer and create an empire covering the whole of Mesopotamia.<sup>427</sup> He must have been some man. One gets the impression that he was all that civilisation would expect a hero to be:<sup>428</sup> patient yet bold, shrewd yet fearless, a

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<sup>422</sup> ANET p. 119

<sup>423</sup> I have, of course, no way of proving that the Yahwist knew of the Sargon legend. However, I take it as being very likely.

<sup>424</sup> ‘This heroic tradition binds the hero with his people. Either by military might, or by skilful intercession, or by familiarity with surroundings and conditions, he defends and aids his own. He brings ‘boons’ to his people.’ Coats, *Moses*, p. 47.

<sup>425</sup> ‘Thus, the Moses birth-adoption tale qualifies as heroic in contrast to the Sargon piece because of its identification of the child with his own people.’ Coats, *Moses*, p. 47.

<sup>426</sup> ‘When [the daughter of Pharaoh] opened [the basket] she saw the child; and lo the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, ‘This is one of the Hebrews’ children.’ Ex 2.6.

<sup>427</sup> See George Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Middlesex England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1980) p. 146.

<sup>428</sup> We live in a society in which hierarchical ideology is so dominant that the image of the ‘hierarchical hero’ and the image of the ‘hero’ are taken to be the same thing. In other words the question as to whether there could be any other picture of the hero than the one we have been subjected to from our cradles hardly ever arises.

fine strategist as well as a great leader of men. For, clearly, at critical junctures in his career he was able to act decisively, overcoming all opposition by his sheer audacity, courage and strength of will till at the end he stood alone and the world applauded! This is emphatically *not* the figure one encounters in the Moses' texts, especially if one reads them with the same eyes and from the same civilisation perspective. Indeed I can't help feeling that the Yahwist intended the comparison with Sargon partly as a joke, for the Moses stories begin with the Hebrew hero's flight as a consequence of his disastrously ill-considered action in killing the Egyptian taskmaster and ends with his abysmal failure to seize the occasion when the opportunity occurred to lead Israel victoriously into the promised land.<sup>429</sup> This state of affairs is surely not fortuitous.

b) Moses as a young adventurer and the lesson of solidarity.

The Moses narrative begins with the hero's attempts to break out of the isolation imposed by his peculiar upbringing and to establish a solidarity with his own people by slaying an Egyptian whom he came across casually beating a Hebrew slave. Though it is easy to sympathise with his motives the natural course of events reveals that his strategy – meeting aggression with aggression – was disastrous. Moses seeks to become a leader of his people but of course the persecuted marginals are not going to acknowledge the leadership of an Egyptian centrarch who for some unknown reason claims to be one of them, or to associate with someone who openly indulges in criminal acts. Consequently, when he subsequently tries to intervene in a quarrel between two fellow Hebrews the aggressor rejects his authority and openly betrays his knowledge of the murder so that Moses is forced to flee the country. Here Coats, in my opinion, completely misses the point. Instead of judging Moses' act in killing the Egyptian aggressor to be a foolish bit of youthful adventurism (as anyone with a modicum of political nous or experience would do) he takes it as a selfless heroic act.<sup>430</sup> Likewise, instead of seeing the subsequent action of the Hebrew slave as a normal reaction, given the circumstances, he describes it as a tragic rejection of the heroic benefactor.<sup>431</sup> In this way Coats demonstrates that he, like most scholars, is just as politically naive and out of touch as the young Moses was. If Moses seeks a role as defender of his people his action in killing the Egyptian is politically inept and if he has to flee for his life and go into exile he has only got himself to blame. Coats' determination to see Moses as an apolitical folk hero leads him to paint over and spoil the Yahwist's vastly more interesting political portrait. What the Yahwist is in fact doing in this opening section of his work is drawing the picture of the nascent political hero of the Hebrew marginals who has to yet to learn the painful lesson that *solidarity with the marginals is a serious business and not something that can be acquired by an act of youthful adventurism.*

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<sup>429</sup> Num 13 & 14

<sup>430</sup> 'For the Hebrew, for [Moses'] own people, the act should be seen as heroic defence, a risk of his own life for the sake of protecting his brother. ... Moses had not yet received God's commission to deliver his people. Would this act of violence not appear premature and thus inappropriate? In no way!... the call commissions Moses for a very explicit responsibility. Here that responsibility has not yet entered the picture. But this act foreshadows it.' Coats, *Moses*, p. 49-50

<sup>431</sup> '... the tragedy of the scene is that the accusation comes from the Hebrews, not from the Egyptians, from the one oppressed by the enemy, for whom Moses risked the violent intervention. The accusation suggests rejection of the hero by the very one he claimed for his own. ... The rejection comes not just from the people at large, but from the single person who benefited from the intervention.' Coats, *Moses*, p. 50

*Being a Hebrew is not simply a matter of birth but of a more serious political belonging.*

c) Moses as a reluctant revolutionary and the lesson of partnership.

Moses finds no peace in exile. His desire for a role to play in the liberation of his people has not deserted him and he dreams of returning to Egypt. However, he hasn't yet got over their painful and unforeseen rejection of his first efforts to help. The Yahwist plays out the resolution of this dilemma in his famous episode of the burning bush, in which God continually calls on Moses to return to Egypt and Moses repeatedly raises objection. I say objection in the singular because in fact it always amounts to the same hesitation: Given what happened the last time what assurance can Moses have that things will be different now? Because Coats has excluded the idea that Moses' first intervention in defence of his people had been a mistake he can see none of this. Consequently he is obliged to find another explanation to account for Moses' hesitancy, a characteristic which even he admits can easily be mistaken for a very unheroic weakness. The idea he comes up with is that it is a literary device:

Moses' objection that he has a heavy mouth and no words should not be taken as a sign of literal physical handicap, or even as an element in a non-heroic or anti-heroic picture in the literature, but rather as a marker that sets up the reassurance. ... The objection does not suggest that a handicap belaboured the work of Moses. Nor does it suggest a literary construct designed to highlight Moses' heroic flaw. Rather it is a literary construct that introduces the Aaronic tradition into the Moses story.<sup>432</sup>

In my opinion this suggestion that Moses' handicap should be taken as nothing more than a way of introducing the Aaronic tradition amounts to a gross trivialization of the Yahwist's art. Clearly Moses is portrayed as someone who is heavily preoccupied by his own inadequacy, given the enormity of the task he is facing, and this is something which the storyteller means us to come to terms with. So while it is plausible that the author *exploited* this situation in order to introduce the personage of Aaron into the story it cannot be the case that the introduction of the Aaronic tradition was its *raison d'être*. That said, Coats is certainly right in saying that the aim of the text is to set up a reassurance. But I have to point out that a reassurance has little content unless it is seen *as a valid response to a real and substantial fear*. Indeed it is the nature of the fear that dictates the character of the reassurance. Coats reduces the importance of the reassurance by leaving us to infer that Moses acts out of personal insecurity. In this way Yahweh's reassurance becomes little more than the sympathy expressed by an understanding parental figure faced with a 'child' who lacks self-confidence.<sup>433</sup>

The true substance of Moses' hesitations is contained in what happened the first time round. Once bitten he is now understandably twice shy. In the light of these hard political misgivings how does the statement that Yahweh will be with him actually work to give a *valid* political reassurance that this time things will be different? The text responds to this question with what becomes a crucial political principle in Israel's ideology: the idea that the power of the Hebrew god manifests itself in an intimate *partnership* with the excluded marginals. The classical centrarchal idea concerning

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<sup>432</sup> Coats, *Moses*, p. 69

<sup>433</sup> 'Moses objects to the commission with a self abasement. And God's response promises divine presence.' Coats, *Moses*, p. 60

the manifestation of a god's power is that, on the contrary, it has to be *mediated*. In Semitic culture it was believed that the power of a deity is such that a too close contact with a god or goddess results in the death of the humans concerned. They are burnt up by the godly presence. In other words the power of a centrarchal god or goddess is conceived of as essentially foreign and dangerous to human beings and can only be put at their disposal when properly mediated by centrarchal officials: the priests, and their chief, the king himself. The image of the bush that burns but is not consumed is therefore a direct contradiction of this centrarchal understanding and conveys to Moses (despite, say, Exodus 19.24 and 24.2) the antithetical way in which Yahweh's power functions as compared with that of all the other deities.<sup>434</sup>

Of course the centrarchs' contention that by using the correct mediatorial performances they were able to tap into the unseen powers of the universe was a charade since the power they exploited did not come from such sources at all but rather from the human sweat and labour which they had purloined. As Bright points out the centrarchal gods were effectively no more than a justification of the *status quo*.<sup>435</sup> The centrarchs established a centre of power and then selected a god and set him or her up as the guarantor of their authority. I speak somewhat loosely here because, of course, in reality the choice was usually a foregone conclusion since the tribal god of the victorious group in power would invariably be given the job – in Sargon's case the god of the people of Agade who adopted him. In other words the power of a centrarchal god is really nothing more than the power which the leaders of a community have managed to draw into its centre by forcing dependency upon the people round about them: 'You give up your responsibility and a major portion of your labours and in return we will exert authority and offer you protection'. Such a power may be substantial, depending on the area controlled; however, it is essentially man-made or, more correctly, man-collected. In the words of the Israelites the centrarchs' deities were in reality nothing more than worthless idols.

What Moses with his partnership principle did was to challenge this centrarchal, collected power by pitting against it the power of the god of the marginals – that power which liberates human potential as opposed to stealing it. As I have suggested, instead of working by persuading people to give up their power and then collecting and exploiting this ostensibly on their behalf, the marginal's god operates, as Moses sees it, to liberate the natural potential present in human beings by offering to work in partnership with them as their encourager and guarantor.<sup>436</sup> Unlike the power of the centrarchal deities this power is not man-made. Rather it is what religious people call the power of the creator, and secular-minded people refer to as the power of life itself.<sup>437</sup> Furthermore it is a power which is not exploitable after the manner of the

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<sup>434</sup> One should not expect the text to be entirely without ideological contradictions not only because numerous editors, some with revisionist tendencies, have been at work on them but also because no revolutionary movement manages to rid itself entirely of reactionary traits.

<sup>435</sup> Bright, *History*, p.161

<sup>436</sup> 'That is exactly what ancient Israel was - the Kingdom of God. There was no delegation of power to a centralised political system.' Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p. 224

<sup>437</sup> See e.g. Deut 4.32-40 and 7.7. It is possible the Yahwist intended to disclose something about this life-power idea in the name Yahweh is said to attribute to himself - 'I am that I am'. However, I wouldn't want to press the point or give the impression that the above understanding has been developed from this

centrarchs for it cannot be abstracted from the human beings it inhabits. Indeed it is a kind of power that can only be tapped by those who advocate independence and self-reliance as over against centrarchal leadership with its transference of responsibility.<sup>438</sup> It is the contention of the biblical writers that the only people truly open to this power are those excluded from civilisation.<sup>439</sup> In their own words it is not Israel or her leaders who choose Yahweh; rather it is Yahweh who chooses them.<sup>440</sup> Yahweh does not become the god of Israel by chance because his eye happens one day to fall on them. Yahweh is *by definition* god of the marginals because only they are in a position to appreciate him, and not because of their strength, for they have none, but because of their weakness.

It now becomes apparent how Yahweh's reassurance works. His promise that he, the partnership god, will be with Moses if he returns to Egypt leads Moses to understand that things *will* be different this time round since (to use the wording of the later prophets) he will be putting himself into the hands of the living God and pitting Yahweh's enormous and contrary power<sup>441</sup> (the power which unleashes the potential of free human spirits) against the power of the centrarchs' lifeless idols (the power of selfish theft and mindless coercion). As regards the rest of the discussion between Yahweh and Moses this is concerned with strategic questions. On the first occasion Moses made the huge political mistake of attempting to enter directly and personally into the conflict with an act of blatant coercion. This time his strategy is to work through solidarity with the Hebrew community i.e. through their position of weakness; consequently all that Yahweh says is directed to the business of convincing them.

#### d) Moses as failed negotiator and the lesson of hardening

Moses has little trouble in persuading the Hebrew leadership to let him negotiate with the Egyptians on their behalf. However, his efforts merely result in the authorities' turning the screws down even harder, and the Hebrew foremen start to blame him for making the peoples' condition worse rather than better. According to Coats the well known *hardening* motif in the plague stories serves simply to emphasise the failure of Moses efforts.<sup>442</sup> He maintains that the present text is made up of two separate exodus traditions which have been developed and woven together. First there is the Moses heroic saga in which negotiations with the Egyptians fail, causing Moses to change tactics and attempt to bolt with the people into the wilderness before the Egyptians have time to react. Second there is the story of Yahweh's mighty acts which find their centre

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name. The understanding comes entirely from the *God of the Marginals* idea as this is unpacked when using the partnership principle, a principle dramatically demonstrated in the icon of the burning bush.

<sup>438</sup> This is not the same contrast as that described by Mendenhall between the individualistic pioneering spirit of Americans as over against the bureaucratic tendency of the communist state.

<sup>439</sup> E.g. Amos 3.1.

<sup>440</sup> E.g. Is 44.1; 65.1. Ezek 16.

<sup>441</sup> E.g. Is 34.4; 41.8-16; 44-1-8.

<sup>442</sup> 'In the structure of the plague story, as well as in the history of the tradition, the most outstanding characteristic of the narration is the depiction of the negotiations ending in failure. The heart-hardening motif clearly emphasizes the failure. And the opening round of negotiations set forth in Exodus 5 shows the result of the negotiation with painful clarity. Indeed Ch. 5 may well offer the most basic level of the tradition history. And if so, then the negotiations tradition would from the beginning represent the result of Moses' efforts to deal with the Pharaoh as a failure.' Coats, *Moses*, p. 96



in the Passover story in which Moses plays a minimal part.<sup>443</sup> Coats recognises that Moses' failure as a negotiator may raise questions about his position as a folk hero in some peoples' minds,<sup>444</sup> however he maintains, somewhat weakly I find, that this is not in fact the case:

...while this unit may not contribute new material to the image of Moses as hero, it does not detract from the thesis ... It would appear to me that the failure in the negotiations process would not detract from the heroic image.<sup>445</sup>

I quite accept that the Moses saga probably concluded with a change of tactics. Once it became clear that the Egyptians were not going to accept the justness of the Hebrews' complaints despite their clear winning of the argument there was really no other option than to make a mad dash for the desert and freedom. That said, Coats must be criticised for failing to deal adequately with the *heart-hardening and failure* theme; this he appears to view simply as an embarrassment to be swept under the carpet. Since it later came to play a crucial role in the Hebrew ideology at the strategic level, first in the call of Isaiah, then again in Jesus' parabolic approach,<sup>446</sup> and then finally in a reverse, heart-softening,<sup>447</sup> mode in the resurrection itself it seems to me that it should be seen as the cradle of the text's ideological core.

Scholarship has detected the presence of at least two separate sources within these texts, using different words for hardening.<sup>448</sup> Bernard S. Childs for his part has further noted that these sources employ the hardening phenomenon in quite distinct ways. Here is a summary of his findings:

In the first source J<sup>449</sup> the hardening is described as either something which just happens to Pharaoh (Pharaoh's heart was hardened) or as something which Pharaoh himself brings about (Pharaoh hardened his heart). The plagues are seen as signs designed to reveal to Pharaoh knowledge of Yahweh<sup>450</sup> and the hardening is a negative reaction to these revelations and results in a failure of the strategy.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> ...the plague tradition experienced extensive changes in the course of its history. Initially a presentation of Moses' negotiations with the Pharaoh, ending with failure and anticipation of the necessity to escape in haste without the permission of the Pharaoh, it became an account of the efforts of Moses and Aaron to secure the release of the people by pressure negotiations, ending with the most severe of all pressures, the death of the Egyptian firstborn. And with this event, the goal for the negotiations is reached. The Pharaoh drives Israel out. In summary two forms of the exodus tradition appear. The Passover version of the story places primary focus on God's intervention, Moses and Aaron simply facilitating the event. But the escape in haste combines divine intervention with the heroic stature of Moses. Moses calls his people to leave under his leadership, without the permission or even the knowledge of the Pharaoh.' Coats, *Moses*, p. 108

<sup>444</sup> 'Does this unit (Exod 5.1 - 6.1) not represent an anti-heroic image of Moses?' Coats, *Moses*, p. 85

<sup>445</sup> Coats, *Moses*, p. 87

<sup>446</sup> Is 6.10, Mk 4.11-12.

<sup>447</sup> See pp. 540-541 below.

<sup>448</sup> 'A rather clear picture of distribution among the sources also emerges. The Yahwist always uses *kabed*. The Priestly writer normally chooses *hazaq*, but once *hiqsah*. The E source choice is parallel to P.' Bernard S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press, 1974) p. 171.

<sup>449</sup> The Yahwist.

<sup>450</sup> 'The signs function in order to reveal the knowledge of Yahweh to Pharaoh'. Childs, *Exodus* p. 171.

<sup>451</sup> 'The hardening serves to prevent the proper functioning of the plagues as a means of knowing Yahweh. ... Hardness for J is not a state of mind, but a specific negative reaction to the signs from God.' Childs, *Exodus* p. 172.

In the second source P<sup>452</sup> the hardening is most often described as something which Yahweh brings about (God hardened Pharaoh's heart). The plagues are not seen as revealing signs aimed at making Pharaoh aware<sup>453</sup> but rather as signs (symbolic manifestations?) of Yahweh's judgement.<sup>454</sup> The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a failure by design so that Yahweh has further opportunities to display judgement against him.<sup>455</sup>

The curious thing is that though Childs quite adequately describes these differing approaches he fails even to try to identify the ideological difference underlying them. These are signalled by the fact that whereas *the Yahwist in his text offers an account of what appears to be a reactive strategy at work* (the plagues being revealing signs designed to make Pharaoh aware of what he is doing) *the priestly writer in his text presents the events dressed up in a proactive gloss* (the plagues being manifestations of Yahweh's judgement in symbolic form). This, of course, is the reason why the Yahwist's account sounds like something which could well have happened whereas the priestly writer's story is plainly theatre: Pharaoh being the fall guy who gets beaten up time and time again just like the poor old Sheriff of Nottingham in the story of Robin Hood. It is true, of course, that even in the Yahwist's account we experience some problems in viewing the plagues in a realistic light and that this makes it difficult for us to see them as operating as exposures. But this is probably only because of our post-Enlightenment mindset. I believe that Childs is basically right in calling the Yahwist's plagues 'revelations of the knowledge of Yahweh' – though I would put it rather differently, labelling them 'revelations of the justice in the marginals' cause' instead.<sup>456</sup>

This is an important issue so it will perhaps be best if we take a little time to understand it. Possessing a post-Enlightenment mind set I have always found these plague stories (just like the miracle stories in the New Testament) difficult to take. Consequently, like many other modern readers I have been interested to try and discover scientifically acceptable ways of understanding them. For example I have toyed with the idea of explaining the Israelite's crossing of the sea in terms of low lying flood plains and unusual winds and tides etc. However, I have now fortunately come to understand, somewhat late in the day, that this whole approach, though understandable given our own way of seeing things, is really rather ridiculous. I say this because it clearly involves reading the texts with my own post-Enlightenment, analytical mind-set instead of with the pre-Enlightenment mind-set of the people who actually wrote them. It seems obvious to me now that if I want to understand these Exodus stories I will do well to see them as an attempt to describe the ideological significance of what was thought to be a given historical situation, using representational techniques rather than as an attempt to give an accurate historical account of what actually happened using abstract terms. People like us should stop asking questions concerning *what the Yahwist is not talking about* – like what actually happened? – and instead should start asking

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<sup>452</sup> The Priestly writer.

<sup>453</sup> 'The plagues do not function to reveal to Pharaoh the knowledge of Yahweh as in J.' Childs, *Exodus* p. 173.

<sup>454</sup> 'The hardening allowed the plagues to be multiplied as a great judgement.' Childs, *Exodus* p. 173.

<sup>455</sup> 'The signs fail in their function, but by design. Because Pharaoh does not hear the plagues continue.' Childs, *Exodus* p. 173.

<sup>456</sup> The plagues are characterised by the way in which they afflict the Egyptians but leave the Hebrews untouched. It is important to understand that the word 'justice' here means *human solidarity* and not *equity*.

questions about *what he is trying to communicate* – like what ideological strategy the Hebrews adopted? When this is done the answers we get to our questions turn out to be much more interesting and substantial.

The Yahwist clearly seeks to show that the strategy the Hebrew community adopted depended on their having the colossal and unprecedented nerve<sup>457</sup> to stand up for themselves and expose the grave injustice (in terms of lack of human solidarity, not of equity) which civilisation was doing to them. He admits, of course, that this in itself was not enough to bring about their liberation. Indeed he openly avows that the consequences of the Hebrew's revelations was that the screws were turned down on them even harder. However, he claims that this hardening of the heart was of itself indicative that *the exposure was getting through*. You could say that *for the very first time in human history the authorities were being faced with the unpalatable truth about themselves*<sup>458</sup> *and were having their true natures revealed*.<sup>459</sup> *And that as this process continued the hardening of their hearts was accentuated, thereby revealing that the exposure was proving more and more effective*.

The trouble was, of course, that the Yahwist did not have the means of actually demonstrating precisely how the Hebrew leaders Moses and Aaron managed to make these exposures so telling, which is to say the actual arguments and stratagems they employed to pierce the righteousness with which the civilisation rulers cloaked themselves.<sup>460</sup> The solution he came up with (as usual) was to indicate the strength and precision of these arguments and stratagems *symbolically*, using the concept of plagues which smote civilisation while leaving the Hebrew community quite untouched. In other words what we have here is yet one more example of the Yahwist's representational techniques to add to the list.

The beauty of looking at the Yahwist's work in this way (which I know isn't easy for people with our mindsets) is that it renders the whole interpretive exercise so much more believable. People like Philip Davies are manifestly right when they point out that, given the absence of written records, the timescale between the historical events in question (circa 1250 BCE) and these Exodus texts themselves (9<sup>th</sup> century BCE at the very earliest though Davies himself and most recent research would put them a few centuries later still) means that we must suppose that the writers of the texts had a minimal amount of firm historical detail to work with. Davies himself suggests none at all! At best I see them as knowing no more than that a group of Hebrew slaves under the inspired leadership of a man named Moses managed to stand up for themselves and break out into the wilderness across the sea of reeds, avoiding their Egyptian pursuers who got stuck in the mud. What this means is that if we try to make sense of these plague stories by giving them 'scientific' explanations we inevitably find ourselves trying to attribute to these ancient writers detailed historical knowledge of what went on which they can't possibly have possessed. If, on the other hand, we see the Yahwist as

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<sup>457</sup> Or 'cheek' as the Egyptians would have seen it.

<sup>458</sup> i.e. with the knowledge of Yahweh meaning the justice of the marginals' cause.

<sup>459</sup> i.e. their hypocrisy.

<sup>460</sup> In my previous book *Light Denied* I have shown that the evangelists experienced exactly the same problem when it came to Jesus' unmasking of the hypocrisy of the Jerusalem authorities, which is why their accounts of his parable-telling are so inadequate.

talking ‘revolutionary’ strategy then of course we have only to attribute to him the barest of firm historical data. Indeed all we need to suppose is that he knew that there had sometime, somewhere been a ‘revolution’ and what sort of a revolution (i.e. a marginal revolution) it was.

To gain a better view of this Hebrew strategy – the subject matter of these Yahwist texts – we will have to pay much closer attention to the workings of these legendary stories.<sup>461</sup> When we read the Yahwist’s account we find what looks at first sight like a dramatic rescue. That said what we have here is clearly not your normal *civilization* rescue story where the hero saves the weak innocents from the clutches of the wicked tyrant. This is the way in which we are inclined to view it but only because such a reading appeals to our civilisation instincts. However, a close inspection shows that it is an illicit reading. For in this story, though Israel certainly escapes it is hard to say that she was rescued by anyone or even that her adversary was overthrown. After all, she does most of the business herself and Pharaoh does the rest by taking his heavy armour where only light infantry should have gone.<sup>462</sup> What we have here, therefore, is a rescue story with a difference: a ‘rescue’ story in fact! Basically this is the tale of a partnership<sup>463</sup> (later formalised by an actual covenant agreement) where Israel, as a community of marginals, does her bit by publicly exposing the way in which civilization is ill-treating her, and Yahweh does his bit by guaranteeing the eventual success of the enterprise – a matter worked out in terms of Yahweh’s *promise*. That is the Yahwist’s story and it clearly has to do with the sort of *reactive exposing strategy* which *the god-of-the-marginals ideology* itself naturally calls forth.<sup>464</sup>

As I have said, the priestly legend for its part appears to be an account of this traditional story of the Hebrew reactive strategy dressed up in a proactive gloss.<sup>465</sup> But what is the ideological significance of this dressing? It is achieved, as I have already pointed out, by beefing up the story’s mythical aspects at the expense of its realism. The plagues are no longer seen as demonstrations and exposures intended to shame the Egyptians and convince them of their wrongdoing. Rather they are symbolic acts of judgement which have to be repeated to achieve their effect, making it dramatically necessary for Yahweh to harden Pharaoh’s heart time after time so that this can happen. This change actually increases the story’s punch by bringing ideology to the fore for, whereas in the J story Yahweh stays pretty much in the background, here he confronts Pharaoh directly: metacosmic god against cosmic champion. The effect is to glorify Yahweh’s standing, of course, but it also has another outcome: it portrays Yahweh as the winner of a contest in which he pits his metacosmic proactive strength against the proactive strength of the world order. This is decidedly not the way in which the god of the marginals operates, as the Yahwist’s story shows. For Yahweh as god of the marginals

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<sup>461</sup> As I see it a legend is an account of an historical event which is given a mythical colouring in order to emphasise the ideological viewpoint from which it is observed.

<sup>462</sup> See Ex 14.24-25.

<sup>463</sup> Notice how in the story Yahweh only ever reveals his hand when humans start acting, e.g. Moses takes action for the Hebrews against an Egyptian oppressor and YAHWEH responds in the burning bush.

<sup>464</sup> Critics will note that I have left out of consideration those important aspects of the text which display Yahweh acting alone e.g. the protective pillars of cloud and fire and the miraculous parting of the waters. I shall be discussing these below at the end of the chapter.

<sup>465</sup> See p. 132 above.

is the one who in accordance with his nature replies to proactive strength with reactive strength: by demonstration and exposure, the strength of the weak.

My conclusion is that what we see here in the priestly account of these *heart-hardening and failure* texts is a clear example of ideological revisionism in which the writer abandons the Yahwist's god-of-the-marginals ideology and covers his tracks with an ostentatious emphasis on the metacosmic god. Clearly this particular dissimulation proved to be a very effective tactic<sup>466</sup> for we regularly find it employed by later generations of establishment clerics both Jewish and Christian. It was used extensively, for example, by the Pharisees in Jesus day as a means of hiding from the demands of the Law, and it was used in an identical manner by twentieth century Christian scholars – one can only presume for similar reasons.<sup>467</sup> Jesus himself spoke witheringly about it as a form of hypocrisy<sup>468</sup> and who but a hypocrite would dispute the point?

e) Moses as a weak leader and the lesson of self-reliance

The expectation of those who admire the Sargonic hero is that as soon as Moses' strategy has been vindicated and the pursuing Egyptians have been seen off Moses will immediately set about establishing a strong central system of command in order to affirm his leadership. This, of course, Moses signally fails to do and what follows is a litany of murmurings directed against a seemingly weak leader.<sup>469</sup> Once again Coats, whose main object is to establish the figure of Moses as the apolitical folk hero, goes to considerable pains to find a way around this obstacle:

The murmuring tradition, so it seems to me, is a relatively late narrative revision of an older tradition, converting an originally positive account of Israel's life under Mosaic leadership to a negative account of rebellion. The reason for this conversion is still a subject for debate. It is probable, nevertheless, that a polemical redaction from the interests of the Jerusalem court and the Davidic kings shifts the tradition to its negative form in order to show that Israel, the ancestors of the northern kingdom, forfeited the privileges of divine election, leaving the door open to a new act of election for David and Zion. ...This interpretation would suggest that the traditions about Moses as leader of the people who followed him in obedience would have been at home in the northern tribes, a hypothesis strengthened by the singular reference to Moses as the prophet who led the exodus in Hos 12.13.<sup>470</sup>

However, seen from a proper, marginal point of view the murmuring tradition, far from constituting an obstacle to heroism introduced by some hypothetical late redactor, represents in fact the ideological nub of the matter. Moses has brought the people out of Egypt. Now they have to develop a proper self-reliance, away from its unhealthy, centrarchal culture of dominance and dependence. It could be claimed that the extensive wilderness areas lying between Egypt and Palestine presented an ideal training ground for instilling such a quality within the fledgling community. It could also be argued that had Moses tried to organise the people along centrarchal lines the chances are that the community would have gone under. Whatever the case may be, the narrative tells what a hard experience it was and how difficult the Israelites found it to shake free from their old ways. They cry out for centrarchal leadership from Moses,

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<sup>466</sup> Even today it is a full time exercise to unmask it.

<sup>467</sup> See my book *Light Denied*. Chapter 11.

<sup>468</sup> See my book *Light Denied*. pp. 270-278.

<sup>469</sup> Ex15.24, 16.2, 17.2

<sup>470</sup> Coats, *Moses*, p.109-10

desiring to be relieved of the responsibility for looking after themselves, and when this is not forthcoming complain bitterly that they were better served even as slaves in Egypt. Moses for his part has considerable trouble in resisting their pressure and if he is to be accounted a hero it is surely in that he manages to do so, against the odds.

If I have a problem with this story it is not in understanding why it depicts Moses as a weak leader from our civilisation point of view. That I find quite easy to grasp. What puzzles me is why it described Yahweh as giving in to the Israelites; as giving them what they want, seeing that their attitude is described as sinful.<sup>471</sup>

And Moses said to them, "Why do you find fault with me? Why do you put the Lord to the proof?" ... And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the Lord to the proof by saying, "Is the Lord amongst us or not?"<sup>472</sup>

Logic would seem to dictate that it would have been better if Yahweh had refused to go on 'saving' the people and instead had instructed them to stir themselves and set about finding solutions to their problems themselves. One has to assume that the Yahwist found this an unacceptable story line because he wanted to portray Yahweh as behaving consistently in the matter of salvation. He could not have Yahweh sometimes agreeing to save Israel and sometimes not since that would undermine his character as the god of the marginals. Whatever the case may be (and we shall be dealing with this matter more fully below, at the end of this chapter) it is clear that the Yahwist sees the Israelites as sinful when they behaved as if their agreement to follow Moses into the wilderness put them in a position of having a call on God when things went wrong. The Yahwist describes this attitude as manipulative as 'putting Yahweh to the proof'. Instead of continuing to act responsibly in the belief that Yahweh would surely vindicate the 'revolution' he had set in motion - in his own time and in his own way - the Israelites abandon responsibility, and demand that Yahweh, who got them into this mess, must now get them out of it. At its heart this is a superstitious attitude since it is a denial of the reality that we have no control over the forces which govern the universe. It is also a return to the centrarchal way of thinking in which human responsibility is sold in return for the right of protection, in the belief that the central authority is in the best position to influence the situation. Of course we see the problem of superstition in our own post-Enlightenment way, as a denial of science. The Yahwist clearly saw it somewhat differently: as a denial of Yahweh's lordship. But in fact it all comes down to the same thing in the end: the need to take responsibility for one's actions and live life seriously, refusing to play silly games of pretence.

f) Moses' indecision and success in the lack of it

From the centrarchal viewpoint of those who hero-worship Sargon, Moses' weakness as a leader is most clearly visible in the indecision he displays when the opportunity arises to lead the people triumphantly into the promised land.<sup>473</sup> This unit, which presents itself as the culmination of the murmurings tradition,<sup>474</sup> depicts the return of

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<sup>471</sup> Ex 15.25, 16.4, 17.5

<sup>472</sup> Ex 17.2, 7. See Deut 6.16.

<sup>473</sup> Num Chs.13 & 14

<sup>474</sup> Num 14.26-35

the Israelite spies who have been sent to investigate Canaan. Their account of the promised land itself is unambiguous. They describe it as ‘flowing with milk and honey’ but, when it comes to assessing Israel’s prospects of capturing it, most urge retreat since ‘the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities fortified and very large’. Only two of their number, Joshua and Caleb, remain firmly positive and urge the community on. However, the people suffer a serious loss of nerve and Moses, plainly distraught, in sharp contrast to Joshua and Caleb offers them no leadership. As a result Yahweh pronounces that of all the adult Israelites, including Moses, only Joshua and Caleb will survive to enter the promised land.<sup>475</sup>

Once again Coats registers this as a problem to be surmounted as regards his Mosaic folk hero image:

The tradition about the death of Moses cannot be taken in itself as an indication of a reflex in the tradition designed to diminish the importance of Moses. Perhaps to attribute Moses’s failure to enter the land to a sin at the spring of Meribah and thus to God’s explicit denial of Moses’ right is to be understood as an effort to diminish the authority of Moses. But significantly, the statement about Moses’ sin comes from the priestly source with its tendency to non-heroic forms of the Moses tradition. The Yahwist reports nothing of Moses’ sin at Meribah. Those texts in Deuteronomy that emphasise Moses’ sin and the consequent denial of right for Moses to enter the land (1.37; 3.26f; 4.21f) show the sin to be heroic. Moses did what he did ‘because of you’, because of his people.<sup>476</sup>

Of course there may have been a tradition prior to the Yahwist that Moses died before reaching the promised land but we cannot hide behind that since we are obliged to admit that it appears in the text as a phenomenon of great dramatic importance, not to be explained away in such a fashion. So we have to ask ourselves what a physical entry into the promised land constituted in terms of the Yahwist’s story. The answer is unambiguous. Entry into the promised land constituted the *success* of the enterprise. In other words by denying Moses a share in this experience the Yahwist is deliberately denying him a share in this success.

For a centrarchal hero like Sargon success of this sort is everything, it is his god’s fundamental stamp of approval. Consequently, the subsequent failure of his empire, even though it occurs long after his death, constitutes the tragic flaw that centrarchal civilisation-man sees as accompanying all human endeavour.<sup>477</sup> In the case of Moses, however, success in these normal, civilisation terms is irrelevant. Israel declares him to be her hero – the hero of the marginals – in spite of the fact that in the classic manner of all marginals he loses his nerve at the critical moment and so has no share in the promised land. In other words, in moving from Sargon to the Moses story the idea of what constitutes success and failure dramatically changes.<sup>478</sup> If Moses’ life is judged to be a resounding ‘success’ it is not because he shows himself to be capable of seizing the moment and bringing his people final victory – because he doesn’t. It is rather

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<sup>475</sup> Num 14.28-30

<sup>476</sup> Coats, *Moses*, p. 202

<sup>477</sup> ‘He took away earth from the (foundation) pits of Babylon and he built upon it a(nother) Babylon beside the town of Agade. On account of this sacrilege he (thus) committed, the great lord Marduk became enraged and destroyed his people by hunger. From the east to the west he alienated (them) from him and inflicted upon [him] (as punishment) that he could not rest (in his grave).’ Pritchard, *ANET* p. 266

<sup>478</sup> See above p. 125-127.

because he never gives in by taking the easy way out and returning to a centrarchal system of governance with himself at its head. Here in this ideological matter his nerve holds surprisingly firm *against all the odds* and it is this which in Israel's eyes stamps him as her 'successful' hero – though few scholars, if any, note the fact. Unlike Coats T. L. Thompson is willing to recognise the biblical writer's *unheroic* portrait of Moses. However, his characteristic blindness to the god-of-the-marginals ideology means that he too completely misses the point. He suggests that Moses is purposefully written down so that Yahweh can be written up.<sup>479</sup> Thus Thompson pulls off the incredible feat of trivialising both Moses and Yahweh, not to mention the Yahwist and the Bible itself!<sup>480</sup> I find it amazing anyone can fail to recognise that Moses *and Yahweh as his ideology* are central to this story, making it preposterous to suggest that Moses is written down.

### Conclusion

All the evidence suggests that Coats is perfectly justified in saying that these texts portray Moses as the hero; however, it is not an *apolitical folk hero* we are speaking about but rather a *political, marginal hero*. Indeed it is the numerous unheroic aspects of the portrait – as judged from the normal civilisation point of view, which cannot be excised without robbing the story of its essential character – that prove beyond doubt that this Moses acts as servant of Yahweh, god of the marginals, and not as the servant of any centrarchal god, ancient or modern.

### *The God-of-the-Marginals Hebrew strategy*

We have already briefly referred to the Hebrew strategy.<sup>481</sup> However, given its significance as the way in which the 'revolutionary' movement attempted to concretise the god-of-the-marginals idea in its own changing historical situation, it manifestly deserves closer scrutiny.

#### *A faith-based strategy*

Perhaps its most striking characteristic is its dubiousness when viewed from a civilization perspective. A strategy is supposed to be a down-to-earth realistic plan of operation for achieving a desired end result. That, at least, is what the word means to us civilisation folk. However, when we look at this god-of-the-marginals strategy we find something rather odd, for the Yahwist *never* argues that in standing up for themselves the Hebrews would set in motion a chain of events which if carried out successfully would lead to their liberation. What he says is that if the Hebrews did their bit by standing up for themselves the centrarchs would without doubt react with hostility *but that in spite of this the Hebrews could be confident that Yahweh would see them right and vindicate the exercise*.

“... you (Moses) and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days journey

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<sup>479</sup> T. L. Thompson *The Bible in History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) p. 93.

<sup>480</sup> See p. 392 below.

<sup>481</sup> See above pp. 66 and 104.



into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all the wonders which I will do in it; after that he will let you go. ...<sup>482</sup>

In other words this Hebrew 'strategy' (I place the word in inverted commas to indicate this idiosyncrasy) is not based *entirely* on realistic, down-to-earth, good sense but at least *to a degree* on faith – which, as we civilisation people see things, is something of a contradiction in terms.

### *A mentally disordered strategy?*

So how are we to understand the reasoning behind this faith-based Hebrew 'strategy'? Before attempting to spell things out we must deal with a popular misconception which has grown up around it. E.P. Sanders and Paula Fredrickson portray this Hebrew strategy, at least as it appeared in late Judaism, as an abandonment of reality.<sup>483</sup> They call it 'Jewish apocalyptic' or 'eschatology' and talk about it as a sort of collective mental disorder<sup>484</sup> they believe was rife in first century Palestine, in which people became detached from the real world and put themselves out on a limb, expecting God to save them when they got into difficulties.<sup>485</sup> There is, of course, no doubt that such a disorder exists and that people probably suffered from it in Jesus' day as they always have done. It may even be true, as Sanders suggests, that Theudas and the 'Egyptian' were among the afflicted though I am not convinced we know enough about them to be sure. That said I am pretty certain that Sanders and Fredrickson are wrong in diagnosing Jesus himself as a victim, something which tends to make me sceptical about their identification of the disorder in other people as well. I say this in the first instance because the original presentations we have of Jesus in the Gospels do not leave the unbiased reader with that impression – Fredrickson claims that this is not an argument.<sup>486</sup> She is right of course but the truth is that only a small proportion of the

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<sup>482</sup> Ex 3.18f.

<sup>483</sup> Sanders: *Figure*, p. 261-2. See quote on p. 39 above. Fredrickson: 'So what do I think happened? 'Shortly after John the Baptist's execution, Jesus would have carried on preaching his message of the coming kingdom, meant literally: Justice established, Israel restored and redeemed, the heavenly Temple "not built by the hand of man" in Jerusalem, the resurrection of the dead, and so on. He gathered followers, some itinerant like himself, others settled in villages. He went up to Jerusalem for Passover – perhaps he always did; I don't know. Then he went back to Galilee, and continued preaching and healing. Next Passover, up again, and back again. And then, perhaps on the third year, he identified that Passover as the one on which the kingdom would arrive. I'm guessing of course, but for several reasons. In the (very reworked) tradition of the triumphal entrance, we may have a genuine echo of the enthusiasm and excitement of this particular pilgrimage. Also, to the other side of events, we have the tradition of the resurrection. I take this fact as one measure of the level of excitement and conviction on the part of Jesus' followers. They went up expecting an eschatological event, the arrival of the kingdom. What they got instead was the crucifixion.,' Fredrickson *What You See is What You Get. Theology Today* Vol 52. No 1. April 1995. pp. 93-4.

<sup>484</sup> They don't of course use such words but the inference is clear. See Fredrickson: 'If Jesus expected the end of the world, then he was mistaken. But if he did, and if he was, so what? Do historians in search of Jesus of Nazareth really expect to turn up the Chalcedonian Christ?' *What you see* p. 95.

<sup>485</sup> I mean by this a supernatural occurrence: an illicit interference of the eschatological in the historical. Illicit because the eschatological cannot leave empirical traces of its passage for if it does so it ceases to be a matter of faith and becomes a certainty.

<sup>486</sup> 'One scholar reviewed [Borg] refuted the possibility of an apocalyptic Jesus on the basis of how weird apocalyptists are now: "Most of us have heard street preachers ... whose message is, 'The end is at hand,

work of a scholar should be taken up in argument. Historians should spend the majority of their time in attempting to give due weight to historical characters and events and I suggest that Sanders' and Fredrickson's presentation of Jesus' death fails disastrously on this score.

Sanders argues that in the classical period of Israelite prophecy (the eighth to the fifth centuries BCE) the thinking was, 'for the most part that God worked in history by using human rulers and armies.' However, his belief is that in later years people began to envisage that God would act in a much more grandiose and personal manner just as he apparently had in earlier years when he parted the sea, produced manna in the wilderness, caused the sun to stand still, and brought down the walls of Jericho. Sanders does not explain the exact nature of the difference he is talking about but what he seems to be saying is that in notable contrast with the prophetic works the books of Exodus and Judges describe God's activity in the world in *supernatural* terms and that this aspect of his character is highlighted by describing such activity as *personal interventions* and *grandiose performances*.<sup>487</sup> But is he right?

Before examining the texts let me say that I believe we are dealing here with a crucial issue since the way in which we answer it will show whether we believe people should nowadays bother with the Bible or not. Let me put the problem before you like this. On the one hand according to everyday experience the laws of nature are seen as being inviolable, making it a sure sign of mental illness if a person conducts their life on any other basis. And let us be clear this is not a modern discovery which results from having a scientific mind-set but something which has always been seen to be true. On the other hand we have been taught by past generations to read the Bible as if it was the history of an apocalyptic god who is prepared to intervene in history and alter the course of events, thereby undermining the natural laws. What are we to make of this situation? I personally must have spent many days if not weeks considering this apparently intractable problem. It is, of course, impossible to get into someone else's head; however, it appears to me that people divide generally into three camps on this issue.

- First, there are the sick and superstitious who because they suffer from delusions<sup>488</sup> see no contradiction between miracles and the laws of nature. We will leave the views of such people aside for obvious reasons.
- Second, there are the atheists who, on the contrary, see the contradiction between miracles and the laws of nature as real and insurmountable and who, given the way in which the Bible has been taught, dismiss it out of hand. This is a perfectly reasonable position; however, it is only finally justified if the biblical point of view has been correctly represented.
- Third, there are the religious. By establishing a significant difference between religion and superstition they seek to show that the contradiction between miracles and the laws of nature is only apparent. They maintain that people should certainly eschew superstition and generally conduct their lives with

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repent!' In my experience, people who strongly believe 'the end is near' sound very different from what I hear in the Jesus tradition." This is not an argument.' *What you see* p. 95.

<sup>487</sup> It should be noted that Sanders is here concerned with how people understood God's activity in the world and not with questions of historicity i.e. what actually happened.

<sup>488</sup> self-imposed or otherwise

regard to the laws of nature. However, they also argue that it is none the less important not to exclude the possibility that the creator *occasionally* and in special circumstances intervenes to perform miracles in answer to prayer.

As I see it, most Christians adopt this third stance which I call the religious myth. However, I have never really found it tenable. For the truth is that when it comes to the laws of nature the difference between religion and superstition (or miracles and magic) is immaterial. You can't argue that a belief in magic as superstition is ruled out of court whereas a belief in magic as miracle<sup>489</sup> is perfectly valid, which is what the religious seem to want. I remember my own teacher Tom Torrance trying to persuade us students of the importance of infant baptism by speaking of it as an occasion on which we could use prayer as a proper way of channelling God's occasional willingness to perform miracles, thereby bringing the chance of life to babies who would otherwise die. To my mind such a way of thinking is a delusion which insults God by portraying him as one who indulges in favouritism, an error which Jesus himself criticised.<sup>490</sup> I reject such thinking outright, especially in connection with the Bible, for if the biblical writers are to be vindicated (and some of them may not be) *it must only be by the truth*. If I can be persuaded that any biblical writer intended to portray Yahweh as the sort of god who, in the face of human petitioning, was occasionally willing to contravene his own laws then I will gladly join the atheists against them. But I tenaciously hold on to the Bible because I still manage to see something of its profoundly important ideological meaning buried beneath such religious trash.

*The religious myth of a god prepared to overrule the natural laws?*

With the importance of the debate in mind let us now return to Sanders' argument. Even though he never attempts to spell out the implications of what he is saying it is not difficult to catch his drift. The picture he paints, after all, is the same vague, religious tableau bequeathed to us by past generations, which, like-it-or-not, we therefore already find in our heads:

The biblical writers wanted to demonstrate that God had occasionally personally intervened in history to change the course of human events by interrupting and countermanding the natural processes. By recounting these stories the biblical writers sought to spur future generations on to petition God to repeat such supernatural performances in their own lifetimes and Jesus, amongst others, fell into this abandonment-of-reality trap.

But is this in fact the picture we find when we actually take the time to seriously study the texts themselves? A trawl through the Yahwist's work produces a fair number of stories in which Yahweh is said to have involved himself with human activity:

- The plagues of Egypt. (Ex 7-12)
- The pillar of cloud/fire and the crossing of the sea of reeds. (Ex 14)
- The provision of manna in the desert (Ex 16.1-8, 13b-36) (Num 11. 1-9)

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<sup>489</sup> Magic approved as theologically correct by the Church.

<sup>490</sup> e.g. The parable of The Barren Fig Tree: Lk.13. 6.

- The provision of quails in the desert (Ez 16. 9-13a) (Num 11. 10-35)
- The provision of water in the desert (Ex 17. 1-7) (Num 20.1-13)
- The defeat of Amalek (Ex 17. 8-15)
- The plague sent as a result of the golden calf incident (Ex 32-35)
- The fire sent to burn the people who complain of their misfortune. (Num 11.1-3)
- Leprosy sent on Miriam and Aaron who complain that Moses was acting autocratically. (Num 12)
- Yahweh threatens the people who refused to enter the promised land with pestilence and disease but Moses dissuades him. (Signs) (Num 14.11-25)
- The spies who argued against entry die of the plague before the Lord. (Num 14.36)
- The People have second thoughts and try to enter the land against Moses' advice and are defeated. (Num 14.39-45)
- The Rubenites who dispute Moses' leadership are swallowed up by the ground. (Num 16. 1b, 12-15, 23-32a)
- Israel attacked by king of Arad but Yahweh gives them into Israel's hand. (Num 2.1-3)
- Israel murmurs and Yahweh sends fiery serpents among them. (Num 21.4-9)
- Israel asks Amorite king Sihon to pass through his territory but he attacks them and is defeated, one suspects, with Yahweh's aid. (Num 21.21-26)
- Og the king of Bashan comes out against Israel and is defeated with Yahweh's aid. (Num 21.33-35)
- Balak the Moabite king asks Balaam to curse Israel but because of Yahweh Balaam ends up blessing them instead. (Num 22-24)
- Israel plays the harlot with the daughters of Moab and Yahweh orders Moses to deal with them. (Num 25.1-5)

A broad perspective such as this is enough to demonstrate that it is simply untrue to say that these stories were designed to highlight Yahweh's occasional supernatural intervention in the course of human affairs. For some of them contain no miraculous element at all and an analysis of those that do shows that the supernatural aspect *per se* plays no part in producing the stories' thrusts. There are certainly one or two stories in which Yahweh is seen to act splendidly alone with no human partner – e.g. the plague of flies (Ex 8.20-24) – however, this feature (which is probably an anomaly) produces no impact at all since the story itself is clearly part of a general pattern in which Yahweh is depicted as operating in close conjunction with Moses and the Hebrew community. Indeed it would appear to be the case that in these stories the basic thrust is in the completely opposite direction since, *characteristically*, Yahweh is described as acting *in partnership* with Israel, a principle that naturally tends to play down the supernatural aspect. The story with undoubtedly the most impact – the crossing of the sea of reeds – is emphatically built on this partnership idea. In the story of the defeat of Amalek the 'miraculous' aspect – Israel's ability to prevail only when Moses' arms are raised – is also clearly designed to highlight this un-supernatural principle. Then, again, it could be judged that some of the stories contain more 'magic' than others but even if it be the case (and it is nothing more than a personal judgement) this too is demonstrably unrelated to their thrusts. For example, Sanders seems to think that the story of the manna is worth mentioning as 'a grandiose act', possibly because he thinks

that the production of a flock of quail and the revelation of a hidden spring of water constitute less noteworthy supernatural performances, but there is nothing in the stories themselves to make one suppose that the writer thought this was the case since he makes nothing out of it. Sometimes the Yahwist introduces what might be taken as magical touches, as for example the raising of Moses arms mentioned above. But he gives us no reason to suppose that he thought these were relevant *as supernatural features* e.g. by indicating that Israel's victory against the Amalekites was somehow more significant because of the arms-raising business than her defeat of Og the king of Bashan where no supernatural occurrence is reported to have taken place. Indeed, he gives us no reason to suppose that he thought Israel's victory over Og was more significant than her defeat of Shion even though he mentions no contribution on Yahweh's part in the latter affair. All of this is not to suggest that the Yahwist was blind to what he was doing in introducing miraculous elements at certain points in his stories. It is simply to point out that the way in which he handles these features does not in any way substantiate the supernatural thesis: the idea that Yahweh is a god prepared on rare occasions to act against the laws of nature. This should in no way surprise us because, when all is said and done, the supernatural thesis is nothing but a bit of spurious nonsense which should have been kicked into the long grass ages ago.

#### *Signs-and-wonders stories as an Israelite speciality*

It is interesting to note that while it is relatively easy to find supernatural elements in the literature from the ancient Near East, I can find nothing which compares with these stories which the Yahwist himself characterises as 'signs and wonders'.<sup>491</sup> Our basic contention is that the root cause of the many striking differences between Israel and the surrounding civilisations was her marginality. So the question is: are the Yahwists' 'signs and wonders' stories explicable in these terms? The answer is that they most certainly are. Without exception all of these stories function to highlight acts of deliverance by some *personality*, that is to say acts in which an individual or community, having no earthly chance of prospering manages to do so with Yahweh's aid. You would not expect a self-respecting centrarch to have any truck with a story that described him or her as being saved by a *personality* (human or god) since they would naturally find this humiliating. Saving acts by personalities of this sort are the product of people who know themselves to be failures in the world's terms and, so far as we know, Israel was the only community in the ancient Near East prepared to admit to seeing herself in this unflattering light. This is undoubtedly the reason why we find no accounts of acts of *deliverances by personalities* in the civilisation literature of the ancient Near East. *Impersonal savings* on the other hand, which is to say deliverances by people of no consequence who don't count as personalities or even by animals, are quite common. For example we have the legend of Sargon where the future hero, abandoned by his mother in a basket on the river Euphrates, is rescued by Akki the drawer of water – Akki signifying not someone but rather the Akkadian people as a whole. Then again we have the story of Romulus and Remus abandoned by their stepfather in a basket on the river Tiber. They are saved by a she-wolf aided by a woodpecker and later by the shepherd Faustulus and his wife Acca Laurentia. There is an interesting variant too in the story of Achilles who is dipped by his mother into the

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<sup>491</sup> Ex 3.20, 7.3, 11.9, 15.11. see also Deut 6.22, 7.19, 26.8, 34.11.

river Styx and thus magically rendered invulnerable<sup>492</sup> by no one in particular. Such impersonal miracles serve to portray the individuals and movements concerned not as natural failures miraculously enabled to prosper but rather as natural heroes blessed by fortune in their fragile beginnings: i.e. circumstances which any hierarch or civilisation would consider as flattering.

*The Yahwist knows nothing of the religious myth*

What we discover as a result of a serious reading is that these texts betray no trace of the religious myth,<sup>493</sup> the one which has to do with the supernatural activity of a god who responds to the prayers of his favourites by breaking the laws of nature and altering the course of history. That has to be a product of some later religious imagination.<sup>494</sup> The biblical texts as a whole are held together by something quite different. However, a word of warning. It is going to be a simple matter to say what this is, *in the language of the texts*, but it will be a much more complicated exercise to explain what the mythological language signifies. So bear with me just a little. Here is the answer in the language of the texts:

*What holds these texts together is the idea that Yahweh rewards a certain type of behaviour and punishes the opposite type of behaviour: the miraculous element being simply a device for suggesting how these ideological rewards and punishments are actualised.*

Thus, for example, when Moses raises his arms and *participates* Yahweh rewards the marginals' efforts, whereas when Moses tires and *ceases to participate* the marginals find themselves being defeated, as is normal. That is the easy bit but the question is what does it mean to say that Yahweh rewards and punishes? And, furthermore, what is the behaviour he rewards and what is the behaviour he punishes? The best way to answer these questions is to translate the italicised sentence above into unambiguous post-enlightenment terminology and then to discuss anything that remains in doubt:

*What holds these texts together is the idea that in the ideological realm life rewards radical solidarity and punishes dominating behaviour; the rewards and punishments being both moral (the production of a good or guilty conscience) and material (the smooth running of affairs on the one hand or the arrival of unforeseen consequences e.g. global warming, on the other). The supernatural element in the stories is simply a common linguistic device used in the ancient Near East to make it clear that in the ideological realm rewards and punishments come about indirectly. In the natural realm rewards and punishments come about directly as when you hit your finger with a hammer. However, in the ideological realm rewards and punishments come about indirectly (i.e. supernaturally) as for example when the god Marduk is described as punishing Sargon long after he was dead by sending down famine and insurrection on his empire.<sup>495</sup>*

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<sup>492</sup> except, of course, in the heel by which she held him.

<sup>493</sup> Contrary to what is generally supposed, most myths though couched in religious language are intrinsically political. This one about a god who has favourites and who defies the natural law, however, is indeed religious and ridiculous to boot!

<sup>494</sup> We have yet to trace the author.

<sup>495</sup> See *ANET* p. 266.

What this translation does is show that when the writer is talking about Yahweh in connection with human behaviour he is talking essentially about what I have called the ideological realm which is to say that whole new world which opened up to the human species when it arrived at consciousness. This new world does not, of course, negate the former pre-consciousness, natural or animal world which the cosmological gods rule with their survival-of-the-fittest laws. That continues as usual. However, over this is now spread a new, moral and material existence. In this, humans find themselves in a position to transform their environment creatively while at the same time being themselves judged morally and materially by what they do. What the Yahwist is saying is that, effectively, in this new ideological realm it is Yahweh and not the cosmological gods who rules. In other words if people exploit their new found capacity for creative manipulation of their environment without at the same time changing their old survival-of-the-fittest animal mentality they will inevitably come unstuck both morally and materially because, in point of fact, the only way of living successfully in this new ideological realm is by adopting an attitude of radical solidarity. That is what the Yahwist means when he speaks of Yahweh rewarding and punishing human behaviour and I believe it is not just profoundly sensible but also materially true – as well as having nothing whatsoever to do with supernatural activity of any description, religious or otherwise. Basically, therefore, what the Yahwist is trying to do in telling these signs-and-wonders stories is to indicate the extraordinary possibilities which are unleashed when the marginals stop behaving in the usual cringing manner in the face of civilisation's bullying ways and start to act confidently and in a manner which demonstrates radical solidarity within the community, believing that Yahweh, as life itself, will vindicate them.

*The ideological realm is not the same as the religious realm*

It is important to understand that this ideological realm I am speaking about in the Yahwist's name is not a spiritual existence in which rewards and punishments are seen as being delivered in some afterlife as opposed to here on earth. The ideological realm is in fact quite as material as the cosmological realm it overlays. However, it is different from the cosmological realm because in the cosmological realm the rewards and punishments handed out, being direct, are evident to everyone who is not sick in the head since when you play fast and loose with reality (e.g. by using a hammer without taking due precautions) you quickly come unstuck. Things are not so clear in the ideological realm because, as we are all only too well aware, people find it difficult, not to say impossible, to agree about political and moral questions. That is why, in an important sense, ideological debate is never ending and never gets anywhere. As far as ideology is concerned the right way is a matter of faith or conviction. In the same way, the rewards and punishments in the ideological realm are not so easily defined. For example, I personally am pretty much convinced that global warming is the result of civilisation's unrestricted exploitative attitude towards the environment and that it manifests itself as a punishment delivered by life itself against civilisations' unreformed survival-of-the-fittest attitudes. However, I am not so naive as to believe that this is as evident to everyone else as it is to me because I know that ideological convictions are matters of faith and seeing and, as such, depend by and large on where your feet are placed. In other words, in such matters I wouldn't necessarily expect a captain of

industry to see things in the same way as I do. The Yahwist sees life from the point of view of the marginals and he sees what it rewards and punishes from that particular perspective; that is clearly what he describes in these so-called, superhuman ‘signs and wonders’ stories.

### *The origin of the religious myth*

But if all of this is true where did the religious myth of the apocalyptic god who is ready on occasions to perform supernatural acts to rescue his servants (who have got into difficulties from doing his work) come from? Sanders points the finger at the Yahwist but he is clearly wrong for, as far as the Bible is concerned, the Yahwist is the writer who actually establishes the ‘revolutionary’ ideology – but, of course, like so many other twentieth century biblical historians Sanders knows nothing of this since he has failed to provide himself with the necessary equipment to identify and analyse ideological matters. However, we have to applaud him for exonerating, the prophets, albeit blindly. For they clearly speak about punishments and rewards in a very material sense: punishment for the nations being the way in which, in the ideological realm, life punishes those communities which act aggressively, while punishment for Israel is the same thing, only with the added sting that she, as Yahweh’s covenant partner, should know better. Sanders also points the finger at the writer of the book of Joshua and it is certainly true that the best examples of biblical supernatural occurrences are to be found in this particular work:

- The walls of Jericho that fell down when the trumpets blew.<sup>496</sup>
- The hailstones that killed more Amorites than Joshua’s army.<sup>497</sup>
- The sun ordered to stand still so that the slaughter could continue.<sup>498</sup>

However, though in comparison with J the book of Judges is stylistically unsophisticated, I personally can detect no ideological difference in the way in which the author handles the question of the Hebrew strategy. Could it be that this religious myth of the supernatural, saving god which we all have at the back of our minds (whether we believe in it or not) arose as a result of the centrarchal idea of patronage and dominance introduced by the revisionists – P and his friends? This certainly appears to be a possibility.

Our problem with the Hebrew strategy is that we tend to be cynical, believing that, given the power politics of the great nations in the ancient Near East, whatever Israel did she would inevitably have succumbed. Because we are civilisation folk, not marginals, we find it difficult to take the Hebrew strategy seriously, even when we see the sense of it. Its implications – the need for radical solidarity and a readiness to sacrifice privileges – terrifies and disgusts us because we love our privileges above everything else. Consequently we *prefer* to view this Hebrew strategy as a bit of religious nonsense rather than as an unpalatable ideological truth. We may acknowledge that it contains a wonderful idea; however, we pronounce it as

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<sup>496</sup> Judges 6.11-21.

<sup>497</sup> Judges 10.11.

<sup>498</sup> Judges 10.12-14.



impracticable and recommend that under no circumstances should it be taken at face value – even if, curiously, everything indicates that Jesus did just that!

Having prepared the ground, let us now go ahead and attempt to write out the Hebrew strategy in full, in our own unambiguous post-enlightenment terms. However, to avoid any misconceptions about what I am doing let me make it quite clear that in putting forward this ‘translation’ I in no way seek to reduce the Hebrew strategy’s meaning or significance. All I seek to do is to place it at *everyone’s* level so that everything about it is open to verification. My version is, inevitably, mainly based on the Yahwist’s work. However, since the ‘strategy’ was a *developing* subject matter it has been necessary to keep an eye on this development, including Jesus’ own contribution, while being careful not to be misled by revisionist tendencies which were always about.

### The Hebrew ‘Strategy’

Civilisation characteristically operates with a negative politics of *dominance*<sup>499</sup> in which communities strive to achieve their freedom at the expense of the freedom of those round about them.<sup>500</sup> Such a politics can lead to unimaginable power and wealth.<sup>501</sup> However, as marginals<sup>502</sup> see all too clearly, it is nonetheless profoundly and inexcusably corrupting of human values and true interests.<sup>503</sup> The only hope for civilisation, therefore, is to learn to operate with an alternative politics where communities positively *help each other to achieve freedom*.<sup>504</sup> But, paradoxically, the only group that is immediately able to see the advantages of, and need for, such a politics is those whom civilisation has excluded.<sup>505</sup> Because they are treated by civilisation as trash, marginals are not only deprived of all leverage – since they are seen as having nothing to contribute – but also of the necessary self-confidence to strive for their liberation in the normal, bullying way. Consequently they recognise only too clearly that they can never be free unless civilisation actually wills it. Naturally,

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<sup>499</sup> See the Adapa myth (against which the Yahwist writes) where such a politics of dominance is advocated by having Adapa installed as the priestly manager of creation. See also the Genesis 1 creation story where the revisionist, priestly writer advocates the same politics by giving mankind the task of subduing the earth and having dominion over it.

<sup>500</sup> The Yahwist does not actually spell out this negative politics of dominance as Amos later does (in chapters 1 & 2) but what he says in Gen 6.1-8 is really quite unambiguous: the fact is that the whole earth is corrupted by attitudes of dominance. See below p. 189.

<sup>501</sup> See the tower of Babel story (Gen 11.1-9).

<sup>502</sup> See the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 1-29).

<sup>503</sup> Today we are inclined to argue that because of its corruption society is destroying itself. This, of course, is the sort of developmental argument we are very used to but which was quite beyond ancient people.

<sup>504</sup> See the Yahwist’s own creation story where in 2.15 man is put in the garden to till and keep it. i.e. to make the earth fruitful. One has to suppose that this included the animals in 2.19-20. See also 3.23.

<sup>505</sup> i.e. the Hebrews, the heroes of the Yahwist’s story. Note that in this story the subjugated are not the same people as the marginals. The subjugated are often either communities which have real prospects of someday achieving their liberation, or revolutionary classes awaiting their time. The excluded have no such hope of liberation. Their hope can only be a hope against hope. The Yahwist must have been aware that there were other oppressed sections of the Egyptian population who were also slaves but he does not include them with the Hebrews.

therefore, they instantly see the point of this alternative *help-others-to-achieve-freedom* politics whereas all the other groups in civilisation are just as naturally blind to it and turn their backs on it.<sup>506</sup> So the only hope for civilisation is that the marginals should have the courage to stand up and protest against their treatment and make a demonstration of the only truly healthy way of life by living together in radical solidarity. In this way, by helping others to achieve their freedom civilisation will be shamed and thus led to discover enough truthfulness and honesty in itself to find the community of former marginals justified over against themselves. In other words if the marginals do their bit then life itself will eventually vindicate them.<sup>507</sup>

### *The Hebrew strategy as an historical development*

This, as I have said, is a definition of the Hebrew strategy *as it finally came to be set out by biblical writers*, the assumption being that it was an understanding which came about gradually as the Hebrew ‘revolution’ developed.<sup>508</sup> As the story itself goes, the actual movement started out quite simply as a particular group of marginals’ desire to achieve acceptable living conditions in Egypt. Encouraged by the ‘revolutionary’ doctrine fed to them by Moses, they one day took the momentous decision to stand up for themselves. Thus the Hebrew ‘revolutionary’ was born. However, the Hebrews quickly came to realise that the Egyptian authorities were never going to willingly accede to their entirely just<sup>509</sup> demands and that they were in no position to bring pressure to force them to give way.<sup>510</sup> It therefore became necessary to plan for an escape to some place where they could set up on their own. According to the story it was only much later, when the Hebrew community had actually become established in central Palestine and started to find itself embroiled with external counter-‘revolutionary’ forces (categorised generally as Philistines<sup>511</sup>) and internal revisionism (categorised as covenant breaking<sup>512</sup>) that it became clear that splendid isolation was no real option. At this point it became necessary for the ‘revolutionary’ movement to look for some new, strategic rationale justifying the ongoing struggle. This explains the development of a third, strategic way of thinking which was neither revolution, (gaining power by force, the strategy seen as materially if not ideologically out of the question from the very beginning) nor escape to splendid isolation (finding a corner of the world where they could do their own thing in peace, the strategy seen as materially if not ideologically out of the question later on), but, rather, world transformation by means of demonstration and shaming (Israel as the light to lighten the Gentiles<sup>513</sup>). What this new strategic thinking amounted to was this. When the ‘revolutionary’ movement managed to get the new community up and running, life itself would

<sup>506</sup> In the Yahwist’s story the Hebrews instantly recognise Yahweh for what he is (Ex 4.31) whereas the Egyptians continuously harden their hearts (5.2).

<sup>507</sup> Of course the Yahwist never actually states this to be the case. That the Hebrews are basically justified and the Egyptians wrong is something which is naturally assumed. This story, after all, is a rationalisation of a ‘revolutionary’ movement.

<sup>508</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the development took a long time.

<sup>509</sup> ‘Just’ in terms of human solidarity.

<sup>510</sup> Ex 3.19

<sup>511</sup> e.g. 1 Sam. & Judg 13-17.

<sup>512</sup> e.g. Amos 2.4-11.

<sup>513</sup> See Amos 6.1-8.

vindicate it (by bringing in the kingdom). In other words civilisation would be shamed and come to recognise the superiority of such a manner of living. As a result of this process it would relent and voluntarily give up its negative politics of dominance – a sign that the kingdom had come. This would mean that Israel would no longer be surrounded by communities intent on enslaving her or of smashing her to bits. Rather, these Gentiles would start using her as a consultant about how to run their own affairs.<sup>514</sup>

*Israel the suffering servant in the Hebrew strategy*

When the Hebrew strategy is thus set out in our own non-mythological terms it immediately becomes obvious that the problem with it is not that it is flawed, for it clearly isn't – even though we civilisation people always argue to the contrary. The problem is with the time that it takes for life to vindicate it, human recalcitrance being what it is, and the suffering that the 'revolutionary' movement therefore has to endure in the process. This posed an acute difficulty for the Hebrew 'revolutionary' movement: how was the community to keep things going on the ground and avoid being wiped out while they waited for life to vindicate what they were doing – a perennial anxiety in biblical literature? In short, was the community allowed or not allowed to defend itself when it was attacked? The answer the 'revolutionary' movement gave to this crucial question seems to have been ideologically slightly wobbly: the community was certainly allowed to defend itself but it was not supposed to become *preoccupied* with matters of defence e.g. by seeking to neutralise those round about it. The reason for this is fairly obvious for, given that the whole object was to demonstrate that life itself vindicates this new way of living and to shame those who naturally relied on brute force, Israel could only undermine the whole demonstration and shaming exercise if she sought to control the neighbours herself.<sup>515</sup>

The thing which is striking about this 'strategy' is that though it ends with an uncomfortable faith-based conclusion – life itself will vindicate – it nonetheless displays throughout a firm desire to stay in touch with reality. In fact there is nothing here to justify the idea that because marginals are in some important sense 'in the right' they are free to cut loose from all the difficult calculations which a strategic exercise implies. The 'strategy' here proposed displays neither a juvenile lack of responsibility (You can forget about the consequences of your actions and concentrate on doing what is right) nor a mental disorder *a la* Sanders (against all reason we believe that at the last moment God will come and save us from our enemies). On the contrary what we have here is a thoroughly down-to-earth, eyes-open analysis of what is wrong with society and what it will take to put it right. As such it is just the sort of 'strategy' one would expect from a group of marginals. For, characteristically, marginals are only too well aware of the *reality* of their situation as a result of having their noses ground into it every day. They are therefore not the sort of people who are afflicted by the kind of

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<sup>514</sup> Is 42.1-9, 49.1-6, 60.1-3, 62.2, 66.12-14, 18. Zech 8.20-23. Mic 7.15-17.

<sup>515</sup> Biblical scholarship has tended to argue that the Yahwist presents a *history*-based 'strategy' in which Israel is called upon to act now, recognising that since Yahweh manifestly saved their forefathers in the past he can be trusted to save them in the present too. The trouble with this way of formulating the matter is not that it is untrue but that it tends to mask the 'world transforming aspect' which is what the Hebrew 'strategy' is all about: implicitly in the Yahwist's work and increasingly explicitly thereafter.

apocalyptic disorder which Sanders talks about. The people who are smitten by this sort of delusion generally come from the middle classes who, despite their sometimes humdrum existence, are cushioned from the hard facts of life. Of course you would not necessarily expect university academics to be overly aware of this since they live in the very same protected environment themselves!

*A wonderful but deluded strategy?*

But what about that final faith statement? Your normal strategy terminates with a simple QED. This one, however, ends *hiatically*<sup>516</sup> with an appeal that effectively *breaks* its down-to-earth, reasoned argument. Given the very strange assumption on which it is based: that Israel, as a community of former marginals living in radical solidarity, was destined to transform the world, doesn't it constitute a clear cut case of manipulative superstition *a la* Sanders and Fredrikson – stemming, no doubt, from the Hebrew writer's use of mythological language: 'Since we are God's servants, if we get ourselves into difficulties while doing his job he will naturally come and save us'?

At first sight it certainly looks as if this might be the case. The only problem with the theory is that in the 'murmuring' stories (see above) the Yahwist actually argues<sup>517</sup> that manipulative exercises of this sort have no place in the Hebrew 'strategy'. Indeed, throughout the ages Hebrews have regularly been beset with the nagging fear that for them as marginals to have any kind of hope may itself be a delusion:

... a well-known Holocaust story. One evening, amid all the squalor and horror of the concentration camps, a group of pious Jews gathered together. They were going to put God on trial. How could an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing God tolerate what was happening to His Chosen people?. All night the debate raged back and forth. In the end there could only be one possible conclusion. There is no God. The Heavens are empty. The evil of the concentration camps could exist because there was no one to stop it. The Jewish religion was based on a fallacy. When the discussion was finished the dawn was breaking. Another day of brutal, back-breaking work lay ahead. All the participants stood up and they all prayed the traditional morning service together.<sup>518</sup>

Plainly, whatever civilisation-defenders like us may say to the contrary, marginals do not need to be told about the dangers of superstition since their situation makes them all too aware of it. Since the marginals are (almost by definition) those who can never hope to achieve freedom in civilisation's normal coercive way<sup>519</sup> it would seem logical to suppose that a 'strategy for liberation' created by them *would be* hiatic. After all such a strategy would inevitably rest on matters beyond their control.<sup>520</sup> As such it would have to be not just down-to-earth and realistic<sup>521</sup> but also faith-centred.<sup>522</sup>

We should not be surprised, therefore, to find this hiatic 'strategy' reoccurring regularly, in one form or another, within the biblical texts. In Isaiah, for example, we

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<sup>516</sup> An adverb of my own invention from the verb to 'hiate' = to gape, or cause a hiatus. [Shorter OED]

<sup>517</sup> I use the word loosely, of course, since it implies an analytical mind set.

<sup>518</sup> Lavinia and Dan Cohn-Sherbok *Judaism: A short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997) pp. 19-20

<sup>519</sup> i.e. operating downwards with restrictions and repression or upwards with strikes and revolution.

<sup>520</sup> i.e. civilisation's shaming and consequent willingness to change its ways.

<sup>521</sup> i.e. in standing up for the marginals and exposing the inadmissible way in which they are treated.

<sup>522</sup> i.e. hoping that civilisation will be able to see but knowing that it won't yet confident that somehow the exercise will be vindicated.

find the prophet embarking with a hiatic hope-against-hope strategy on what realistically is a hopeless task:

Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate, and the Lord removes men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.<sup>523</sup>

And in the case of Jesus we find him embarking on a hiatic 'strategy' of the cross. How can we civilisation folk argue with that? ... but of course we will, sometimes with our dying breath!

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<sup>523</sup> Is 6.8-13.



## Chapter 8.

### An Interpolation on Myth

In the previous chapter we began to adduce the evidence for the god-of-the-marginals thesis which states that the ruling political idea in the biblical ideology is the notion that Yahweh is the one who by nature always sides with those excluded from civilisation's common benefits. We examined first the word Hebrew itself, then dealt with the evidence found in the Moses texts and finally homed in on the Hebrew's 'revolutionary' strategy. There is plenty more evidence for this god-of-the-marginals thesis in the Genesis myths<sup>524</sup> but to properly appreciate it we must first acquire a grasp of the genre itself: the task we give ourselves in the present chapter.

#### *The Functioning of Myth*

##### *Myths as Representations*

As I have previously pointed out in my understanding myth is fundamentally a linguistic device. Like figure and allegory it is a representational speech-form and as such operates as a facilitator. In fact myth is distinguished from allegory, its nearest relative, only in that it restricts itself to a narrow, traditional range of symbols in which the powers that humans experience in the universe are represented, for convenience' sake, by supernatural beings: gods and goddesses and the like. Apart from this, myth operates no differently from allegory.

##### *Myths as Assertions*

As representational speech-forms, myths in general and the Genesis myths in particular function proactively *to spell out a given perspectives on life*. As such they are very different from illustrative stories such as parables. As reactive speech-forms parables take for granted a given perspective on life their purpose being *to open peoples' eyes to the way in which they are behaving given this perspective*. In other words, whereas parables *illuminate* and *expose*, myths *indoctrinate* and *confirm*.

##### *Myths as Descriptive*

As representational stories myths are *descriptive* not *analytical*. Myths neither stem from scientific curiosity nor seek to invoke it. The only type of curiosity myths deal with is childlike. Typically, an untutored child is interested *to learn how to adjust to a phenomenon not to understand how it works*. If a child asks why a dog wags its tail it is not because she wants to understand more about animals from their behaviour but because she wants to learn how to live in a world which includes tail-wagging dogs. Given that myths only deal in childlike curiosity we can say with assurance that they

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<sup>524</sup> Gen 2-11.

are aetiological stories which give descriptive and assertive answers to questions about how one should adjust to the universe as it is experienced from where the author stands.

### *Myths as Existential*

It follows from the above that myths are to be understood as *existential* stories not *historical* stories. By this I mean to indicate that they seek to give an understanding of how things stand as they *are* and not to explain the process by which things *have come to be* as we now find them.<sup>525</sup> As such they concentrate not simply on what we would call material facts but on the ideological resonances people experience in existence. Some people call this the spiritual dimension.<sup>526</sup> I prefer to avoid the word since it implies a religious awareness and the fact of the matter is that *there is very little religion if any in ancient Near Eastern myths including those found in the Bible.*

### *Myths as Ideological*

The myths of the ancient Near East deal with both high and low existential matters, with questions like: Why was man created? as well as with questions like: Why are people afraid of snakes? However, the emphasis is clearly on the former, which means that mythical assertions usually demonstrate strong ideological colouring. As such the myths of the ancient Near East are concerned to make assertions about the highest, most contestable and scientifically unverifiable aspect of existence: how power in the sense of human initiative and creativity should be exercised in any given circumstance. Scientists like Richard Dawkins who decry the works of myth while avoiding the basic issue with which they deal<sup>527</sup> (politics/morals/ethics) are inexcusably naive. The fact that it is intrinsically impossible to scientifically verify the answer given to *any* ideological question does not mean that being aware of the right answer is unimportant. Indeed, the way scientists actually behave is conclusive proof that they, like all of us, share the conviction that ideology matters even if the chances are that there will always be disagreement about the proper way to behave.

### *Definition of Myth*

*Myth is a representational speech-form and linguistic device used by ancient people who lacked our facility in dealing with abstractions. It functions by means of a set of fixed verbal symbols – the mythological superstructure – in which all the unseen forces experienced within the universe are represented as supernatural beings.*

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<sup>525</sup> ‘In defining the terms *myth* and *history* it is best for our purposes to keep to a rather broad understanding of these genres. Following the lead of recent discussion, I would suggest that myth is a traditional story about events in which the god or gods are the main actors and the action takes place outside of historical time. In addition, myth contains some structure of meaning that is concerned with the deep problems of life and offers explanations for the way things are. John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis*, (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1992) p.25

<sup>526</sup> See Marcus Borg’s *The three dimensional world of Space, Time and Spirit in Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) p.130

<sup>527</sup> Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995) p. 33



*Definition of a myth*

*A myth is a representational story which uses mythological language (as defined above) to provide an assertive and existential description of how something seen from a particular ideological perspective stands.*

*A linguistic as opposed to a literary approach.*

Now it has to be admitted that this *linguistic* approach, where myth is defined as a speech-form and viewed in the first instance as a *technique* of expression, is not the one generally adopted by biblical scholars. They have characteristically preferred to work with a *literary* definition in which an attempt is made to isolate the salient characteristics of myth understood as a *genre*. For example, Benedikt Otzen defines the subject in two ways: first as stories that represent events which take place outside historical time and space,

Unlike saga myth has no basis in history, nor does it in any case pretend to belong to the time and the space of history. Myth exceeds the boundaries of history, and the events of which it speaks lie beyond the pale of real time, in which historical events occur. Myth has its own time, which may be designated mythical time; it consists of *Urzeit* and *Endzeit*, that which lies both before and after historical time. This understanding of myth has become current in recent research in the history of religions.<sup>528</sup>

and second as stories that relate in one way or another to cultic proceedings.

... earlier we gave a preliminary definition of myth as that which represents an event which occurs outside historical space and time, in the primitive time or at the end of time. Now we can go a step further: it is also characteristic of myth that it is, in one way or another, bound to the cult.<sup>529</sup>

I have a number of disagreements with Otzen:

- *Myths don't have their own time*

I find it misleading for Otzen to suggest that myth 'has its own time' situated 'before and after historical time' since that can all too easily give the impression that myths are concerned with *processes*. In fact, in sharp distinction to history, myth is exclusively concerned with existential questions; with *how things are*. In history we deal with processes, in myth with essential nature. It would have been safer therefore had Otzen stated that myths are 'timeless'. If they often function in a primeval setting it is simply because this is the easiest way of highlighting their 'timeless' characteristic. In their myths the ancients asserted their understanding of the basic rules governing the game of life, whereas in their histories they described how people actually played out this game in their lives. I am not suggesting that Otzen himself falls into the trap of seeing myth-time as a reflection of the earliest period of universal history but he certainly leaves it open for others to do so.

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<sup>528</sup> Benedict Otzen, Hans Gottleib and Knud Jeppesen, *Myths in the Old Testament*, (London: SCM, 1980) p. 7

<sup>529</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p.11

- *All talk of demythologising is just eyewash*

The initial problem in defining myth from a literary standpoint is that the genre was constantly changing. Consequently, when it comes to distinguishing genuine from false myths everything depends on the point of development at which one bases one's definition. I think lay people would be rather surprised to know that biblical scholars like Otzen consider the stories at the beginning of Genesis not as *myths* but rather as exercises in *demythologising*, since the lay understanding of mythology is largely based on these stories!<sup>530</sup> In any case, as I see it this demythologising thesis is without credibility since whatever the Genesis scribes were up to there is no evidence to suggest that they were responding to a change of mindset, as for example from a representational to a scientific one. By comparison, the efforts of Bultmann and his followers on the New Testament were rightly seen as exercises in demythologising since their expressed intention was to help people with a scientific mindset to understand the work of ancient writers by abstracting the mythical elements from their texts and replacing them with existential equivalents.<sup>531</sup>

- *Myths may differ but only ideologically*

Though I reject the notion that the writers of the Jewish Bible were demythologising I in no way wish to deny that they found plenty to disagree with in the stories they borrowed from the Mesopotamians. All I want to do is to make clear that, whatever these disagreements were, the biblical writers never had a problem with the mythical form as such. Though they changed some of the terms used, or on some occasions suppressed them altogether, they none-the-less continued to express themselves in the usual, traditional, imaginatively symbolic (i.e. representational) manner.<sup>532</sup> Perhaps the absurdity of this talk about demythologising is beginning to sink in, for John Van Seters states that when it comes to a clash of mind-sets it is between ourselves and the ancients and not between Israel and her opponents.

On the surface, myth and history suggest a set of contrasts between fantasy and reality, fiction and fact, the supernatural and the natural, the paradigmatic act and the singular, unrepeatable event. Or one can speak of contrasting consciousness in which the mythological and the historical are set at different poles: the one timeless and otherworldly; the other bound to chronology and to concrete factual experiences. One can point to myth's close association with religion, ritual, and the world of the gods while viewing history as basically secular and political. This view of the matter, however, is an anachronism when applied to the ancients for whom our modern sense of history and what is appropriate historical research is quite unknown. A little familiarity with ancient texts reveals that these contrasting qualities of myth and history can often be found in the same work, so that in any given instance, such as the

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<sup>530</sup> 'We have also pointed out that these conceptions have been so comprehensively reworked within the biblical tradition, and with such independence and assurance, that we can almost speak of a form of 'demythologizing'. Otzen, *Myths*, p.51. See also Bright: 'Creator of all things without intermediary or assistance, he [Yahweh] had no pantheon, no consort, and no progeny. Consequently Israel developed no myth, and borrowed none save to devitalize it.' Bright, *History*, p. 138.

<sup>531</sup> Hans Werner-Bartsch (ed), *Kerugma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, (London: SPCK, 1953 Vol I, 1962 Vol II) Vol I pp. 1-44, Vol II pp. 181-194.

<sup>532</sup> Some scholars argue that myth involves a multiplicity of gods and since Israel operated with only one her stories about him cannot properly be classified as myths. Thus K.I. Johannesen: 'Myths prefer to involve several gods.... Myths lack their essential framework in Israel.' (Otzen, *Myths*, p. 24.) I find this argument unconvincing because arbitrary.

*Histories* of Herodotus or the biblical books from Genesis to 2 Kings, there is a mixture that is not easy to categorize.<sup>533</sup>

- *The Biblical myths as culturally unsophisticated but ideologically acute*

The danger in working with this literary contrast between myth and history is that it is all too easy to fall into the trap of believing that myth is a primitive, naive or shallow medium of expression and that this is why the Israelites supposedly ‘demythologised’ or otherwise domesticated the stories they borrowed from the Mesopotamians. Thus Otzen:

The decisive question that emerged was concerned with the relationship between the foreign myths which Israel appropriated and Israel’s own self understanding, as expressed in the OT. One might suppose that it should be possible to point to a degree of tension between the religious forms of expression peculiar to Israel and those of the foreign mythology. ... This view is held by several scholars, who maintain that the OT offers evidence of a perpetual tendency to reject myth, or in some way to take exception to it. ... However, there is also the possibility ... that Israel was able to interpret the myth in such a way that it became ‘domesticated’ and was no longer perceived as a body foreign to the OT.<sup>534</sup>

If the suggestion here is that the Genesis stories are more sophisticated or refined than the Mesopotamian versions on which they are all too clearly based then the claim is simply untrue. Indeed the reverse is the case. A comparison using literary standards shows the Genesis stories to be decidedly provincial, lacking in humour and general artistic merit. Indeed if it were not for their ideological content we would find them really rather dull. Certainly the best Mesopotamian myths, dealing as they do with lust, intrigue, fallibility, and all aspects of the exertion of power to bring about public order and the development of society, seem much more modern and interesting to our civilized ears.

However, Otzen is perfectly right to detect a marked tension between the Mesopotamian myths and those in Genesis. But this tension is ideological and not, as he appears to believe, a matter of form – religious or otherwise. Consequently, comparing these stories as literature achieves little except to highlight the fact that to a large extent the Israelites were cultural backwoodsmen who were obliged to borrow most of what little they possessed – except of course their ideology!

- *Myths associated with cult*

With myth defined *linguistically* as a *speech-form* I would not want to deny Otzen’s contention that it is often (though by no means always) found in association with cultic and ahistorical reflection. That this should be the case is not in the least surprising. The facilitating technique of mythical language is most usefully employed when discussing the deep and hidden grain of the universe, which is to say humanity’s political/moral/ethical awareness. Since the cult was the prime context in which ancient communities celebrated this fundamental existential awareness and made their collective responses

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<sup>533</sup> ↪ John Van Seters, *Prologue*, p.24

<sup>534</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p.4. See also p.29: ‘In late Judaism (i.e. in the P material) Yahweh has become the distant and elevated divinity who creates by means of his word alone. The more primitive and more mythological understanding is to be found in the ‘action narrative’ (in J), in which God ‘makes things’. As well as p.38: ‘It is thoroughly typical of the OT that we find this tension between a mythological and a more reflective theological view of things side by side.’

to it, it would have been most surprising if mythical expression were absent from a community's cultic performances.<sup>535</sup>

- *Myth as a form of ideological expression*

What emerges from this reflection is that ancient people habitually used mythological language to express their ideas in the high existential register to describe the way they viewed life from their own particular standpoints. Otzen appears in the beginning to appreciate this general situation:

Only through myth can primitive man, who thinks in religious terms, give form to his understanding of the most elemental and profound problems of life. Further, it is only through myth that he is intellectually able to comprehend the nature of the things that surround him.<sup>536</sup>

- *Religion a very slippery word when applied to Israel*

In saying this I take it that by 'religious' he means the pre-scientific mind-set shared by everyone in the ancient world. However, what happens to this word when he starts using it specifically of Israel's thinking?

We have many times ... referred to the Israelite's independent attitude to the myths he had borrowed from abroad, and to the fact that he always subjected these materials to revision when he attempted to express his own understanding of the world. If we try to explain *why* the Israelite behaved in this way in relation to the mythical, we would quickly arrive at the fundamentally and specifically Israelite nucleus of Israel's religion.<sup>537</sup>

Here the usage has definitely slipped since by 'religion' he is clearly no longer referring to pre-scientific thinking but to something belonging to Israel as over against the Mesopotamians. In short he has moved from the field of 'mind-sets' to the field of 'ideology'. So the question now becomes: what is the ideological content Otzen is referring to by the word 'religion'? Does this nucleus he talks about consist of a political or a metacosmological set of ideas, or both?

The explanation is to be found in the Israelite understanding of God, and in the Israelite view of history. To put it somewhat sharply, we maintain that the Israelite views on God and history brought about a tendency to replace the original, real, cult-bound myth of the primeval era with accounts of the high points of the history of the nation, the events of 'salvation history'. ... This could be termed a sort of demythologising, or, conversely, it could be regarded as a mythologizing of history. It is in any case connected with the Israelite's insistence that Yahweh is primarily a God who reveals himself through his activities in history.<sup>538</sup>

- *Otzen finally unmasked as a liberal revisionist*

Because of all this talk of demythologizing I found it a little difficult to answer this question at first. As I have already pointed out it is anachronistic to speak about demythologizing for in no way can we pretend that the thought-forms in the Bible are

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<sup>535</sup> Van Seters also challenges the notion that myth is indelibly associated with cult: 'The discussion of myth in biblical studies has long been dominated by the concern to define or understand myth in terms of its mentality and its association with ritual. The 'mental' and cult-functional parameters are so tightly circumscribed that it is easy to show how, in the biblical tradition, the mentality of myth has been broken and the mythical fragment transformed to a new purpose. This approach is no longer adequate. Given the very rich corpus of literary works from the classical world of ancient Greece, it would be helpful to look at the problem of myth in this culture. ... There is little evidence that Greek myth had any ritualistic function. *Prologue*, p. 30

<sup>536</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p. 21

<sup>537</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p.59

<sup>538</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p. 59

more analytical and less representational than those expressed in the Mesopotamian myths. If we clear away this confusion we see that the nucleus Otzen is referring to is simply the idea 'that Yahweh is primarily a god who reveals himself through his activities in history'.<sup>539</sup> This appears to be his way as a liberal revisionist of stating the *Metacosmological* idea detached from the *God of the Marginals* notion. The implication is that, regardless of Yahweh's political nature (i.e. of what he is like as the god of the marginals) he exists before and beyond the universe he created even though he reveals himself historically within it. So here we have another scholar who categorically refuses to acknowledge *any political dimension* in Israel's ideology. The fact that Otzen remains firmly in the religious domain and never gives the political basis of Israel's 'religion' the slightest bit of credence leads me to suspect that he is as confused about the place of politics within Israel's ideology as Bright and Sanders are.

*A demonstration of the ideological nature of myth*

Clearly we are faced here with an important collective blindness as regards the essential *political* nature of myth, that is, as ideological expression. So, before examining the Genesis stories it will be as well, perhaps, if I demonstrate the intrinsic political nature of the Mesopotamian myths on which everyone seems to agree they were based. I will use the Atra-Hasis story, the first part of which has been recounted above.<sup>540</sup> I will focus on an aspect of this story which has been clearly recognised but which has never, as far as I know, been given its proper explanation. I refer to the tension exhibited between the two great Sumerian gods Enki and Enlil.

In the Sumerian pantheon Enlil was the *de facto* principle god since An, his father, had gone into semi-retirement in heaven. As such, in the Atra-Hasis story he reflects the interests of the small, ruling, military elite in the city states which made up Mesopotamian society. On the other hand Enki, who was the god of wisdom and fresh water, reflects the interests of that other, clearly defined group amongst the rulers of Mesopotamia: the priestly administrators. Their job was to organise these complex city states, especially as regards the maintenance of the irrigation system and the granting of water rights.

Though these Mesopotamian myths were unearthed from the ruins of royal archives they were clearly not the product of the military elites but of the priestly administrators for whom the art of writing was a special preserve. Not surprisingly, therefore, the

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<sup>539</sup> G. Ernest Wright offers a very similar argument in his book *The Old Testament Against its Environment* (London: SCM, 1950). He defines myth as the polytheists' natural language for describing the operation of the universe, given that they were not concerned with abstract thought (p. 19). He agrees that like the polytheists' myths the Hebrew stories were not the product of speculative thought or analysis (p. 20). However, this does not stop him from trying to argue that the God of Israel had no mythology since the basis of Hebrew literature was history not nature. In other words he claims that we should understand the Genesis stories as history not myth even though they may not fit into the framework of time by which we measure history! (p. 28). It seems to me that he gets himself into this impossible situation of having to argue that black is white simply because he refuses to admit the obvious: that the Hebrews used the same linguistic devices as everyone else in the ancient Near East myth included. He cannot admit this, of course, since it would imply that the differences between Israel and the other nations (which are all too real) were political and not religious.

<sup>540</sup> pp. 67-68.

Atra-Hasis myth reflects the administrative rather than the military point of view. The writer shows all due deference to Enlil as a matter of course but humorously downplays his ability to deal with the problems that arise. First, when the minor gods revolt because their complaints about their unremitting toil go unheard, Enlil is depicted as suffering a serious loss of nerve. He suggests that the ruling elite should try and put down the revolt by a naked display of force. Later, when all the gods, who in the meantime have become a leisured class, are disturbed by the noise made by the rapidly expanding population of humans – created so as to relieve the gods of their irksome labours – he is once again provoked into taking extreme, authoritarian measures. He sends down a great flood on earth, coming within an ace of destroying the entire creation and thus losing everything that has collectively been achieved!

On both occasions Enki is forced to rescue the situation by deploying his wonderful administrative skills, skills which the writer clearly considers to be the true cornerstone of Mesopotamian civilisation. In other words the story makes a clear political statement that, though it is certainly true that civilisation comes into being as a result of the authoritarian power and organisation exercised by the military elite it has to be managed with intelligence and imagination by the administrative elite, if it is to endure. The story finishes somewhat ironically, with Enki offering a paean of praise to Enlil which he emphatically does not deserve. In this way the recognised hierarchical order between the military and administrators is re-established but not, one suspects, without a conspiratorial wink to the audience, since everyone secretly knows that though Enlil gets the bouquet Enki is in fact the true hero. In its liveliness, perceptiveness and cultivated wit (characteristics which strongly bring to mind the Gilbert and Sullivan operas) this magnificent work far surpasses its biblical counterpart, the story of Noah and the flood, which is ploddingly serious-minded, not to say dull, in comparison.<sup>541</sup>

In drawing attention to the underlying tension between Enki and Enlil in the Atra-Hasis story and to its intrinsic political character I am not suggesting that the sole purpose of the myth was to countenance centrachical power. In the Atra-hasis story we are clearly dealing with a developed piece of writing based on existing material. Indeed it would seem likely that the writer had in his possession at least two separate traditions, the first dealing with the business of why human society was created and the second with the whole question as to why it was periodically afflicted with natural disasters. What he has done is to take these traditions and weld them together, using his own political theme. So what we now have is a story with a number of layers. My conviction is that were we to take the individual traditions lying behind the Atra-Hasis story we would find that they too were based on perspectives incorporating equally strong ideological, and therefore political, outlooks.

With this demonstration of the ideological nature of one particular Mesopotamian story in mind we will now proceed to use our new-found knowledge of this ancient, representative, linguistic technology to try and understand the Genesis myths themselves.

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<sup>541</sup> A point, which to be fair, is noted by Otzen: 'There is no doubt that from a literary point of view the Gilgamesh epic is far superior to the biblical narrative.' *Myths*, p.57

## Chapter 9

### The Evidence for The God of the Marginals Idea in the Genesis Myths

Scholarship has firmly established three things about the Genesis myths:

1. The material on which they were based was borrowed from the surrounding civilisations.<sup>542</sup>
2. This material was extensively revised.<sup>543</sup>
3. This was an ongoing process, with later editors reworking the material over and over again.<sup>544</sup>

#### *Were the Hebrew Myths the Result of Religious or of Ideological Disagreement?*

It is interesting to note that, when it comes to the question how exactly this foreign material was reworked and revised, twentieth century biblical scholars almost invariably discuss the process in terms of ‘demythologising’. This essentially means that the process itself and the understood import of the texts is taken as being religious and cultural rather than political and ideological.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>542</sup> Just what is the position of myth in the opening chapters of Genesis? It appears that Israel adopted a great deal, perhaps even most, of this material from neighbouring cultures, but it is equally clear that the Israelites subjected these materials at every point to a thorough revision. Otzen, *Myths*, p.45.

<sup>543</sup> ‘Israel’s religious literature .. was utterly different from that of its environment. Even though the writers borrowed widely from every source, they radically transformed all that was borrowed.’ Wright *Old* pp. 28.

<sup>544</sup> ‘Scientific research has shown that behind the present form of this narrative (of paradise and the fall: Gen 2-3) are traditions of various kinds, traditions that only in small part were united with one another by the final hand of the Yahwist, but had already merged much earlier.’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 98

<sup>545</sup> E.g. Von Rad: ‘It must be stressed .. that in our narrative (the story of Paradise, Gen 2.4-25) the mythical is almost completely stripped away. ... The myths of many peoples tell about the existence of a tree of life whose fruit (with continued eating) grant immortality. The occurrence of this idea in the Old Testament, which is so nonmythological, is almost startling.’ *Genesis*, p. 78. G.E. Wright: ‘One further remark alone can be made here. That is the remarkable fact that the God of Israel had no mythology.’ *Old* pp. 26. Walter Zimmerli here commenting on the priestly writer’s work in Gen 1.: ‘The impassioned desire to demythologize the cosmic elements shows itself not only in the sequence that places the earth’s flora before the astral entities, which rank highest in the Babylonian environment of P, but above all in the avoidance of the words “sun” and “moon”, which obviously have mythological connotations. These powers of heaven are strikingly instrumentalised; the author speaks merely of the greater and lesser luminaries.’ *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke Ltd, 1978) p. 34. Van Seters: ‘In Gen 3.20 “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.” It would appear that the concept of a mother goddess, responsible for the creation of mankind, has been ‘demythologised’ in the figure of Eve.’ *Prologue* p. 124. See also Otzen in n. 2 above.

*Demythologising as a consequence of the development of a new linguistics.*

Since it is easy to become confused by this supposed demythologisation, especially in view of the purported distinction between a religious and an ideological approach, we need to think the whole thing through rather carefully. The fundamental question as to whether the Israelites disagreed with the surrounding civilisations *religiously* or *ideologically* is not as simple as it looks since there are a number of possible ways of answering it.

1. One possibility is that the disagreement was basically ideological (my own position). Here the inference is that in the beginning there were few if any cultural differences between Israel and her neighbours. She too was an indigenous community<sup>546</sup> and was religious like everyone else sharing the common mythological and representational linguistics. However, an important political difference arose as a result of the leading Hebrew element in her midst. This group was pursuing very specific interests because of its historical experience as a group of former escapee marginals.
2. Taking the alternative line, in which the disagreement is seen as religious not ideological, two further possibilities present themselves. Either a major cultural change took place in Israel in which the community became religiously novel<sup>547</sup> and this set her against her neighbours who had not changed.
3. Or else Israel had moved into the area as a foreign body with a completely different cultural heritage – like, fancifully, an incoming hoard of Buddhists.

If possibility 1 is correct then it stands to reason that Israel would have been forced to reinvent for herself a whole new mythology since the mythological stories, belonging to the surrounding civilisations from which she had become marginalized, would all have been indelibly coloured by the centrarchal ideology which she had become so opposed to as a result of her experience. However, having no particular religious or cultural axe to grind, the chances are she would have used these foreign stories as the basis of her own myths. That said, she would naturally have purged them of their centrarchal features and replaced these with her own Hebrew ideology.

If possibility 2 is correct it would have been perfectly natural for Israel to demythologise her own mythological heritage if for some reason she had suddenly become less religious and wished to adapt this heritage to a less religious way of thinking. However, it would have been her own stories she would have been working on, not those of her neighbours (as seems to have been the case here).

If possibility 3 is correct there would, of course, have been no question of demythologising other peoples' mythological stories since, as an established foreign religious body, Israel would presumably have already possessed her own appropriate religious language (whatever this happened to be) and would have seen no need to adopt the mythological language of the people already living in the area, let alone go to all the bother of demythologising it.

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<sup>546</sup> As archaeology confirms.

<sup>547</sup> As happened e.g. in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe during the enlightenment.



Given the common understanding that the Yahwist used foreign myths as the basis upon which to construct his own stories and, judging by the above three possibilities alone, it certainly looks as if the Yahwist must have seen Israel's differences with these civilisations as ideological and political. So how is it that biblical scholars almost universally contradict this finding? Why do they argue instead that the differences were religious and cultural and involved an anti-pagan and pro-history process which they label demythologising? It is clear that demythologising, at least in the proper sense of the word, is only appropriate in possibility 2 where Israel is seen as culturally non-religious.<sup>548</sup> But, of course, such an hypothesis is a non starter since no one can possibly be unaware that Israel – like everyone else in the ancient Near East – had a religious manner of thought. So why do biblical scholars continue to talk about Israel's literature as an exercise in demythologising?

*Demythologising as a way out of the ideological trap.*

In the nineteenth century, scholarship happily viewed the Israelites as an invading hoard of religious foreigners equipped with a complete range of mythological stories of their own devising (i.e. possibility 3). However, the discovery, through archaeology, that this was not the case, that the Israelites were not actually foreigners and that their stories were not original but had largely been borrowed from the surrounding civilisations, made a complete rethink necessary. Given the range of hypotheses set out above it would have been logical, as I have said, for biblical scholars to conclude that possibility 1 was correct. *But this would have meant recognising that the Israelites distinguished themselves from their neighbours ideologically rather than religiously, and the Christian community was far from being ready for such a radical thought, as indeed appears to remain the case today.* Consequently, in order to avoid the unwelcome, open arms of possibility 1, and with possibilities 2 & 3 being unsustainable, it became imperative for Christian scholarship to find some new, alternative hypothesis *situated within the religious sphere.* It is this new religious hypothesis that they are describing when they speak about the biblical texts in terms of demythologising. For example, Van Seters argues that in the account of the birth of Cain the concept of a mother goddess, responsible for the creation of mankind, has been 'demythologised' in the figure of Eve.<sup>549</sup> Likewise, Benedikt Otzen points out that in the priestly myth in Genesis 1 God creates things simply by word of mouth, in strong contrast to the older, Yahwist, text in Genesis 2 in which he is seen as using his own bare hands like all manual workers do.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Pace Wright who argues that, on the contrary, in its primary sense the word myth is associated with nature worship and polytheism and that it is used by modern theologians (e.g. Bultmann) in connection with the biblical references to the supra-historical, with creation and eschatology only in an unacknowledged derivative sense: 'When modern theologians revive the term' myth' and use it to describe those portions of the Biblical writing which deal with the supra-historical, with creation and with eschatology, they should make clear that they are using the term in its derived, not primary or original, sense. ... The religion of Israel suddenly appears in history, breaking radically with the mythopoeic approach to reality.' Wright, *Old* pp. 28.

<sup>549</sup> See n. 545 above.

<sup>550</sup> 'The concept of the word as the only link between the Creator and his creation establishes an objective distance which is intended to prohibit any attempt to understand the creation as part of God's being; it is solely a product of his will. Thus the priestly circles strive in a number of ways to prevent mythological understanding of their account of creation, which is nevertheless composed from older mythological

*Demythologising as gentrification.*

The trouble with this demythologising talk is its lack of precision and its ambiguity.<sup>551</sup> However, one way of understanding it is to see the suggestion as being that Israel had a moralistic disagreement with her neighbours and this motivated her to purify or gentrify the stories which she borrowed from them:

‘... we should perhaps mention a couple of passages in which we can again sense the efforts of the priestly craftsmen to suppress the mythological idea and thus prevent the hearers from wandering onto paths of thought which, according to the priestly point of view, lay uncomfortably close to paganism. It is also likely that these conceptions were much too close to those of Israelite ‘popular religion’.<sup>552</sup>

This understanding is basically that of possibility 2, the cultural factor provoking change being seen as a heightening of religious/moral sensibility. It is well known that civilisation is prone to such gentrifying movements, the rise of Zoroastrianism being one example and the returning Babylonian exiles another. However, the idea of a process of gentrification cannot be used to account for the Genesis myths as a whole since the Yahwist’s work is just as down-to-earth, physical and ungentrified as that of the Mesopotamian mythologists. Indeed it is not even safe to assume that this gentrification process constitutes a forward step, ideologically speaking, however much it may appeal to Christian civilisation people like ourselves. To put the matter crudely, in ideological terms there is nothing much to choose between a story of a god who physically impregnates a girl so that she conceives and bears his child and a story of a god who effects the same end but by means of his holy spirit. For in both cases the story is just a myth, so its physicality (or gentrified lack of it) is basically immaterial. In fact the only thing that makes a real difference is the ideologies represented by the gods in question and how their respective acts of impregnation reveal their ideological colours.<sup>553</sup> In spite of what they say in admiration of the priestly writer’s work<sup>554</sup> scholars probably don’t as a matter of fact think that the Hebrews were simply intent on a moralistic gentrification of the myths of the surrounding civilisations. They are undoubtedly aware that such a hypothesis would never bear the weight of the true differences between Israel and her neighbours. Such insinuations are for the gallery (they understand our Christendom prejudices). So we will have to look into the demythologising business more deeply.

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materials and doubtless in an older form was moulded by mythological conceptions.’ Otzen, *Myths*, pp.38-9.

<sup>551</sup> I suspect it may not simply be that its advocates are muddled but that they do not wish people to analyse things too closely.

<sup>552</sup> Otzen, *Myth*, p. 39.

<sup>553</sup> It would be interesting therefore to ask yourself whether your natural disgust at having the story of the virgin birth compared to Zeus’ seduction of Leda is due to your recognition of the true ideological differences between the stories or simply to your distaste as a ‘civilisation’ person to having your gentrified Christian myth compared with a vulgar, pagan one.

<sup>554</sup> ‘This account of creation bears the unmistakable stamp of theological reflection, far surpassing that of the Yahwist’s account.’ Zimmerli, *Outline* p. 34.

*Demythologising as the consequence of metacosmic belief.*

One other way of understanding this word demythologising is to see it as just another way of describing the appearance in Israel of the *metacosmic* idea.<sup>555</sup> There is no way of denying that such a notion did develop in Israel and that it was indeed religious by nature. This makes it seem perfectly reasonable for scholars to claim that it was the appearance of this metacosmic belief which provoked Israel's profound disagreement with her neighbours. However, it is far from certain that we should accept this demythologising=metacosmization hypothesis as it stands since it does not constitute a valid historical explanation. My own position (possibility 1) is that this metacosmic idea was a secondary development,<sup>556</sup> my understanding being that the Hebrew community *first* established the god-of-the-marginals idea as a direct consequence of their pursuit of their marginal interests. The metacosmic notion then naturally developed *as a direct result* since it was clearly seen by the Hebrews that the pursuit of their marginal interests constituted an act of defiance against the cosmological order. In other words the Hebrews could only dare to pursue their marginal interests if they maintained that behind the cosmological order – ruled by the cosmological gods – from which they had been marginalized, stood a metacosmic creator who was on their side. This, of course, is not the way in which biblical scholars see things. They do not even recognise the god-of-the-marginals idea and when it comes to the metacosmic god those scholars who admit to finding such a concept in the texts<sup>557</sup> explicitly reject the notion that it came about as a result of sociological development,<sup>558</sup> which means that they are obliged to offer some alternative explanation if they wish to be taken seriously as historians. In possibility 2 the development is seen as coming by way of a cultural breakthrough: either as a result of the discovery of a new linguistics or by way of a moral gentrification. In possibility 3 the problem is largely avoided by implying that the

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<sup>555</sup> See pp. 158-159 above.

<sup>556</sup> See Chapter 11 below.

<sup>557</sup> There is, of course a new wave of biblical scholars sometimes referred to as the 'minimalists' (see below Chapter 11 p. 241) who avoid the issue of the metacosmic god by restricting their conversation to biblical monotheism: an idea they see as developing out of Yahweh's gradual emergence as high god of the pantheon. However, such an understanding to be demonstrably false (See pp. 250-252 below). More pertinently, the refusal of this new wave of scholars to deal with the metacosmic god, the avowed champion of their heroes – the returning exiles – of itself excludes them from this discussion.

<sup>558</sup> '... we cannot assume that a mere description of an evolutionary process provides the explanation for matters which belong to the realm of religious faith. ... How did Israel become a nation with such faith in its God that its very existence was conceived to be a miracle of grace? ... Sociological study cannot explain it, since the change in material status from nomadic to agricultural life could effect no such religious innovation. ... Israel's knowledge of her election by God must be traced to a theological reflection on the meaning of the Exodus from Egypt. It is a primary datum in Old Testament theology, and it belongs to a realm of religious faith which cannot be described or understood by the criteria of growth. ... What is the Israelite mutation, which made the particular and peculiar evolution of Biblical faith a possibility? This is precisely what the study of environment and development has been unable to define. It has been assumed that a considerable proportion of Israel's allegedly unique contributions to religion were not of her own discovery. She borrowed from many sources, and her uniqueness consisted in the alterations and improvements which she imposed upon what was borrowed." But what led to these 'alterations' and 'improvements'? Why is this question not examined? I find it necessary to agree with W. Eichrodt when he says that the source of the difficulty lies in the inability of the developmental hypothesis to take seriously the story of God's revelation and covenant at Mt. Sinai. Thus no fixed starting point is provided for the unfolding of Israel's knowledge of God. Even Wellhausen, the great pathfinder of the developmental history, often used to admit: 'Why Chemosh of Moab never became the God of righteousness and the Creator of heaven and earth is a question to which one can give no satisfactory answer.' Wright, *Old* pp. 13-14.

developmental process, whatever it was, took place in Israel's distant nomadic past. Traditional biblical scholarship,<sup>559</sup> for its part, in advocating the demythologising hypothesis explains the appearance of Israel's metacosmic belief by resorting to the concept of revelation, thereby carefully avoiding the notion of social development:

In the fields of law, politics, economics, literature, cultus, and even of the affective and conceptual life, Israel was heavily dependant upon and thoroughly a part of her environment. The astonishing thing is that far more basic resemblances exist between the religions of the ancient world than exist between the Bible and any one of them. What Israel borrowed was the least significant; it was fitted into an entirely new context of faith. What once was pagan now became thoroughly Israelite, or else became the source of dissension in the community. Consequently, the Christian and the Jew as well, look upon this distinctiveness of the Old Testament as proof of its claim for special revelation.<sup>560</sup>

But, as we have already noted above,<sup>561</sup> revelation in the sense in which the word is used here is an eschatological category. As such it is quite incapable of providing a *valid* historical explanation for the existence of the metacosmic-god idea or any other idea for that matter. History demands cause and effect processes which leave traces of their passage that historians can do their best to recover; the eschatological, by definition, leaves no such traces and is solely amenable to faith. So in turning its back on the god-of-the-marginals idea it would seem that biblical scholarship has abandoned historical research by excluding the only valid historical explanation for the development of this metacosmic idea.<sup>562</sup>

This is not their only error for, in vainly searching for a religious rather than an ideological meaning for these Genesis stories, biblical scholarship has also been guilty of deliberately distracting attention from their main thrusts, which, like all the myths from the ancient Near East are very obviously ideological,<sup>563</sup> and focusing instead on their mythological detail. The work of Peter F. Ellis is a case in point.<sup>564</sup> In treating with the Adam and Eve myth<sup>565</sup> Ellis claims that 'taking the man from outside the garden and placing him in a terrain fertile and abundantly watered is a description of the Exodus in miniature and also, in miniature, a description of the taking possession of the promised land.'<sup>566</sup> He also claims that when the Yahwist describes the garden as

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<sup>559</sup> i.e. excluding the 'minimalists'.

<sup>560</sup> Wright *Old* pp. 73-4.

<sup>561</sup> See p. 116 above.

<sup>562</sup> Wright recognises the danger of abandoning historical research but still erroneously thinks he can somehow operate as an historian while denying that the *metacosmic* idea came by way of an historical development: 'It seems to me that the only avenue of approach toward a solution of our problem is through a consideration of those primary elements of Israel's faith which distinguish it sharply from the religions of its environment. The dangers of such a procedure are obvious. We must not turn our backs upon the fruits of historical and critical study nor upon the manifold evidences of development in the Israelite religious consciousness. Yet religious faith is more than a series of rationally developed doctrines. It is an inclusive interpretation of life which gives meaning to existence; it implies an Object, a 'Wholly Other,' to which one is committed by ties of conviction and trust, and which supplies the answer to the question: 'Why do I live, and how am I to live, that my hope and my effort may have meaning?' Every religion has its primary concern at this point. ' Each has its own analysis of and answer to the problem of life. How did the answer of Israel differ from that of her neighbors?' Wright, *Old* p. 16.

<sup>563</sup> See immediately below.

<sup>564</sup> Peter F. Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969)

<sup>565</sup> Gen 2.4b-3.24.

<sup>566</sup> Ellis, *Yahwist* p. 186.

being ‘given to Adam not just as a place in which to dwell, but “to cultivate and take care of it”’ he may have in mind the covenant pattern. Seeing that the Genesis story does not in fact describe God as moving Adam into the garden from outside of it,<sup>567</sup> and that the idea of an agreement – the crucial element in any covenant pattern – is conspicuously absent, you could be forgiven for wondering what Ellis is playing at in passing such comments. However, since they are but introductory remarks we will bite our tongue and wait until he shows his full hand. You will remember how, in the story, because the serpent had urged Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge God says to it at the end: ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel’.<sup>568</sup> In delivering his punch line Ellis claims that what the Yahwist actually has in mind here is that ‘it is the seed of Judah, the dynasty of David, which will, according to God’s plan, conquer the seed of the serpent (i.e. the devotees of the Canaanite fertility cults<sup>569</sup>) and recover for mankind that blessed communion with God which was man’s glory before the fall.’<sup>570</sup>

As in the previous cases it is important to savour the sheer outrageousness of this suggestion. What colossal nerve Ellis has, to pretend that these words in Genesis 3.15 indicate either a *conquest* or a *recovery*! He tries hard to make us believe that they do – in spite of all the evidence to the contrary – by talking about the story-teller’s prediction that ‘the seed of the woman will crush the serpent’s head.’<sup>571</sup> But of course such a prediction only exists *in Ellis’ head*. What the story-teller actually describes is something very obviously mutual: the shared detestation that exists *between men and snakes*, and which causes each to inflict pain on the other whenever they happen to meet. As such, the story has nothing whatsoever to say about killing or conquest, though, given the intense mutual animosity, it is perfectly true that on occasion death does result *on one side or the other*. Ellis makes a great deal of the fact that what we have here in Genesis 3.15 is a ‘curse’ involving ‘seed’. He does this because the religious pattern which he has in mind to read into it and into the Yahwist’s work as a whole – David’s recovery on mankind’s behalf of communion with God through the destruction of the pagan fertility cults – has supposedly everything to do with these features: David being Eve’s seed, the pagan fertility cults being the serpent’s seed and this text itself being the first in a whole series involving curses which foreshadow Israel’s eventual *religious* recovery under the monarchy.<sup>572</sup> But how can he possibly pretend that such a series of curse-filled texts naturally points in the direction of *a recovery of communion with God*, given that the whole point about a biblical curse is that it speaks about a tragic loss *which can never be recovered*? When the Yahwist described God as cursing the serpent, telling him that unlike all the other animals he would henceforth move about on his belly with his face in the dirt, did he have in mind some future date when things would be different? Of course not! Such an idea is absurd since it would have quite ruined what he was trying to say, which depended for its effect on the very fact that a curse given by God can *never* be overturned – since only

<sup>567</sup> What the Yahwist describes is God first making Adam and then creating a garden for him to live in.

<sup>568</sup> Gen 3.15

<sup>569</sup> Ellis *Yahwist* p. 197.

<sup>570</sup> Ellis *Yahwist* p. 200.

<sup>571</sup> Ellis, *Yahwist* p. 199. The author is of course thinking of Balaam’s oracle (Num 24.17) where he prophesies that some future king of Israel (presumably David) will crush the forehead of Moab.

<sup>572</sup> Gen 3.15; Gen 9.25-7; Gen 12.1-3 (cf. also 26.3-4, 27.29, 28.14-15); 49.8-12; Num 24.17-19.

God could change it and he is not fickle. As the Yahwist saw things, because of what had happened serpents will *never* walk about on legs, woman will *never* bring forth children without pain and men will *never* produce a living without back-breaking work. In just such a manner therefore he must also surely have believed that man's relationship with snakes will *never* be without mutual animosity.

That that is what the Yahwist was saying in Genesis 3.15 seems to me as clear as the nose on my face and there is no reason that I can see for anyone to have any lingering doubts about it. But for Ellis anything so simple and straightforward cannot be so. As he sees it there has simply got to be some link between 'the description of man's happy state before the 'fall' in Gen 2-3 and the whole of the patriarchal and national history that follows'<sup>573</sup> (or to put it more crudely we are obliged to find the 'paradise lost and paradise regained' religious pattern within the Yahwist's work even if it isn't, as a matter of fact, there). He admits that the link is elusive and cannot easily be demonstrated, and pretends that it has something to do with this Genesis 3.15 text which, as he puts it, for centuries biblical exegetes have failed to crack. But, if this is true, isn't it simply because such exegetes too have insisted on adopting the religious approach with its fictive paradise lost and paradise regained linkage? After all, if like Ellis you insist on seeing Genesis 3.15 as 'a promise that involved the conquest of the serpent who had turned the first man and woman against God'<sup>574</sup> then it seems to me you deserve all you get in the way of eternal exegetical bewilderment, since the whole thing is a pure invention which has nothing whatever to do with the story the Yahwist tells.<sup>575</sup>

The fact is that it takes no great exegetical insight to see just how badly this whole religious/cultural approach (both in its demythologising guise and in its paradise lost - and - regained pattern) accords with the Genesis story, which makes one wonder why biblical scholars remain so attached to it. If we adopt a political/ideological line, as I propose, it is necessary in the first instance to ignore the mythological details within a story, which could easily side-track us into secondary, editorial matters, and to focus instead on the story's subject matter and general approach, since it is these which will disclose to us the general ideological perspective of the myth-maker. Only after we have confirmed what the subject matter and general approach are will we turn to the details of the story in order to determine the precise roles these play within the general scheme.

### *The Adapa Myth*

Therefore let us now look at a couple of myths dealing with the creation of Man. The main lines of the Sumerian story of Adapa go something like this:

In the beginning the gods and goddesses had had to do all their own work, like procuring their own food and drink.<sup>576</sup> To relieve them of this labour Enki<sup>577</sup> had created Adapa, giving him

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<sup>573</sup> Ellis, *Yahwist* p. 172.

<sup>574</sup> P. 173

<sup>575</sup> One further curse to be added to all the rest!

<sup>576</sup> This feature is not in the text that has survived. Indeed none of the extant copies of the myth include its beginning. However, the feature itself is justified by other Mesopotamian myths which deal with the

wisdom so that he could do the job, but not eternal life. So Adapa carried out his allotted task of baking all the bread and catching all the fish for the sanctuary of Eridu. However, one day when Adapa was out fishing the south wind blew up into such a gale that he was pitched out of his boat and into the sea. The humiliation of it put Adapa into such a rage that he forgot himself and cursed the south wind, breaking its wings so that it could blow no more. An, the father of the gods, noticing the south wind's absence, asked his vizier what had become of it and was told everything that had happened. In consternation An commanded that Adapa be brought to heaven to stand before him. When Enki heard of this he feared<sup>578</sup> what An might do to Adapa, the cherished slave who had relieved the gods of their irksome labours. He therefore told Adapa that if An should offer him anything to eat or drink he should politely refuse in case it was poisoned. What Enki didn't know was that An had no intention of poisoning Adapa but had decided to make him a god instead. Thus when Adapa presented himself An offered him the bread and water of eternal (?) life. Following the clear instructions of Enki Adapa politely refused, much to An's astonishment. Of course An enquired about this strange behaviour and on being told the reason for it burst out laughing at the idea that Enki should have the presumption to believe that he was more farsighted than An himself, father of the gods. Finally An decreed Adapa's fate. He ordained that Adapa should function as the priest within the universe and he instructed that several minor gods should look after his welfare since, as he was destined, after all, to be mortal, he was liable to fall sick of all sorts of diseases.

The subject of this myth is clearly Man's standing in the universe: his status and destiny. The approach to the subject is by way of two concepts, mortality and wisdom, mortality being the salient characteristic of creaturely beings, and wisdom the salient characteristic of the gods. The question the myth poses is this: Man finds himself in a universe inhabited by godly creators on the one hand and by animal creatures on the other; however, he does not fit comfortably into either of these categories since he is mortal like the creatures but blessed with wisdom like the gods. So, given these twin characteristics, what is Man's status and what is his destiny? The answer the myth asserts is that Man was given wisdom to do the job for which he was created, i.e. to administer the universe for the benefit of the gods. However, unfortunately, he missed out on immortality because of a godly foul-up.

It may at first sight seem that this assertion, though tragic, is ideologically neutral. However this is not in fact the case, since it clearly does have a distinct political colouring. Notice, first, that unlike the Atra-Hasis story, here the tension is between An and Enki not Enlil and Enki<sup>579</sup> and second that here the eyebrow is raised against Enki rather than against his opponent. This does not indicate that we are dealing with a revenge myth written by a member of the military against the priestly administrators, for even though the story tells how Enki inadvertently messed things up there is no doubt that he is the hero of the piece. Furthermore, the choice of An rather than Enlil as the interlocutor demonstrates that the priestly writer does not see Enki as challenging any specific political grouping but rather as daring to back his intelligence against the normal functioning of the centrarchal system as a whole. Indeed, the myth envisages

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creation of man. Furthermore it is a necessary element in order to understand why Enki goes out on a limb to protect Adapa, and in any case it is suggested in the text as it stands, in that Enki is described as relaxing while Adapa does all the work.

<sup>577</sup> And possibly other gods and goddesses

<sup>578</sup> This too is surmise since ancient writers, having no psychological vocabulary, express what individuals think only by what they say and do.

<sup>579</sup> An is the father of the gods and represents the centrarchal system as a whole. Enki is the god of wisdom and represents the administrative centrarchy and Enlil is the warrior god and represents the military centrarchy. See above p. 72.

no real conflict between the gods and intends no real criticism of Enki. Rather it seeks by its raised eyebrow to magnify the honour due to him for his astonishing boldness.

Turning to the contents of the myth, Enki's present of *wisdom*, which distinguishes Adapa from the other creatures, reminds us that *wisdom* is one of Enki's dominant characteristics.<sup>580</sup> He is the god of *wisdom* and as such represents the interests and concerns of the author's own priestly-scribal class. So, from the author's point of view this wisdom is not just the feature which distinguishes Man from the animals but also the characteristic he takes pride in as an administrator. In other words what we have in the Adapa myth is a centrarch construing Man's position within the universe as a reflection of his own position within society. In his eyes this godly intelligence, which has separated him off from the *hoi poloi*, giving him a privileged and central position within society so that he may administer it for the benefit and glory of the gods, is also the characteristic that has separated Man from the animals, giving him a privileged, central position in charge of the natural order so that he may manage it – for the benefit of the gods. That this is the true picture presented by the myth and not something I have invented is confirmed by the destiny which An ordains for Adapa as the *priest*<sup>581</sup> of the universe:

His priesthood to glorify in the future he decreed as destiny.<sup>582</sup>

So far from being a politically neutral concept, as one might first have thought, this *wisdom* turns out to be a clear political characteristic: administrative prowess, with an indelible, centrarchal, political colouring.

#### *The Adam and Eve myth (Gen 2.4b-3.24)*

In my understanding the Adam story is the Hebrew 'equivalent' of the Mesopotamian Adapa myth. This conclusion is based not simply on the fact that they are generally concerned with the same subject matter, the creation of Man, but also that both stories deal with the same conundrum: what is Man's standing in the universe, given his twin attributes of wisdom and mortality? and produce the same response: Man has a median position between god and creature.<sup>583</sup> That said, there are many important differences which indeed are heightened by the general similarity in subject matter and approach. In the first place, of course, in the Genesis story Man is not represented at the end of the day by Adam on his own but by the Adam-and-Eve coupling. We may still detect a male chauvinist aspect within the story but, given its historical setting, it would be hard to over-emphasise how significant this difference must have appeared at the time. That said, the most significant differences lie elsewhere, in the way in which Man is seen as positioned within the universe and as operating. Thus, whereas in the Mesopotamian story Adapa is seen as the priestly administrator of the universe whose job it is to satisfy his bosses' needs, in the Genesis story Adam operates as gardener to 'till and keep it', i.e. to make the garden fruitful so that he can satisfy his own needs, his boss

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<sup>580</sup> The other two being that of co-creator of man, and god of fresh water.

<sup>581</sup> For the Mesopotamians the priest is not just a cultic officer but also a scribe and administrator.

<sup>582</sup> *ANET* p. 102.

<sup>583</sup> This is not to say that Man operates as mediator in both stories for a mediator is endowed with hierarchical status which is true of Adapa's situation but untrue of Adam's (see below).



apparently having none.<sup>584</sup> Then, again, whereas Adapa is created with the godly attribute of wisdom (here, as we have said, understood as administrative skill) but, through no conceivable fault of his own, tragically misses out on immortality, Adam for his part is created with immortality (here understood as an unconsciousness of mortality) which he loses as a result of his quest for wisdom (here understood as knowledge which brings consciousness<sup>585</sup> – i.e. a whole package of awarenesses including good-and-evil, mortality and sexuality). It is, of course, my contention that these differences should be examined in order to determine the different ideological view-points of the myth-makers, these perspectives being the whole point in telling the stories.

#### *Wisdom as gift or awakening?*

Comparing the two myths highlights an important difference. For the Yahwist, the wisdom Man acquires, which separates him from the other creatures, is not a gift, as in the Mesopotamian myth, but rather a political/moral/ethical awakening which comes by way of his own adventurous behaviour i.e.: choice. This means that there is no question of seeing the process as a promotion. Adam and Eve do not become privileged over the rest of creation as a result of their newfound ‘ideological’ awareness. On the contrary they continue to be governed by the general principle of all life – that of living in accordance with their creaturely natures – only now they have the added burden of actually knowing what this is and therefore the responsibility of guiding their own lives. This being the case Adam’s and Eve’s status as regards the rest of creation is quite unaffected by their new awareness. Before his awakening Man was gardener.<sup>586</sup> After his awakening Man is steppeland agriculturist.<sup>587</sup> In other words it is the *conditions* that alter, not the *status*.

#### *Wisdom as bringing status or possibilities?*

But what is Man’s status in the Adam and Eve story? Adapa’s status was defined in terms of his destiny to *relieve the gods of their irksome toil*. This is what gave him his position as the *priestly administrator* of creation, or *mediator*. The Yahwist cannot define Adam’s status in the same way since to do so would countenance the hideous cosmic idea that Yahweh created Man to satisfy a secret need he experienced. How then does the Yahwist describe Man’s status? Otzen argues that he sees Man as the king:

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<sup>584</sup> ‘The garden may not be called the garden of God at all, in the narrower sense, much less the “dwelling of God”! The garden was planted only for man and is to be understood as a gift of God’s gracious care for the man he created.’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 78. T. L. Thompson who prides himself on understanding these stories misses this point completely. He writes: ‘The reason .. Yahweh first made the human was to be his gardener; the garden had need of him.’ Thompson, *Bible* p. 84. The Yahwist would have found such an interpretation not just deforming but scandalously so. For his story has nothing to say about the needs of Yahweh or of his garden. His Adam was neither Yahweh’s gardener nor was he described as the gardener of Eden. All the story says is that Yahweh put Adam in his newly made garden so that Adam could make a living for himself by tilling the soil.

<sup>585</sup> eye-opening.

<sup>586</sup> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Gen 2.15

<sup>587</sup> Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. Gen 3.17,18

...the narrative in Gen. 2 accords to man a special place in relation to the rest of creation. His task in the garden of Eden is to 'till and keep it', and it is also man who is permitted to give the animals names, a task which in ancient oriental thought signified that man was to endow the animals with their various qualities, corresponding to their names. When man calls an animal 'lion', he thereby gives it 'lion character'. Man thus is included in the work of creation and regarded as king over it. This is a mythological characteristic with which we are familiar from other cultures: the first man is perceived as a king, while subsequent kings are, conversely, understood as incarnations of the first man. In Mesopotamia, the king was occasionally regarded as a living representative of the mythological gardener of paradise.<sup>588</sup>

I presume Otzen is basing his contention that in Mesopotamia the king was occasionally regarded as a living representative of the mythological gardener of paradise on the fact that in the Sargon Legend the hero is described as being made 'Akki's gardener'.<sup>589</sup> His interpretation of this cryptic phrase *may* be right. However, there is no evidence of the King in Israel being called the gardener anymore than there is evidence in the myth of Adam being called the gardener which means that there is nothing in this gardening business to suggest that in the myth Adam is given the status of 'king'. A similar criticism could also be made of Otzen's claim that Man's naming of the animals implies that he is considered as the king.<sup>590</sup> Certainly this feature indicates that Man was at a different *level* to the creatures and, as such, an intermediary between them and God. That, after all, was part of the basic scheme on which both the Adapa and Adam stories are built. However, to say that this gives Man the status of king is going rather far, especially considering how much the structure of kingship was contested in Israel. If the Yahwist intended his readers to see Adam as king he would surely have made such an important point very clear and not left them to infer it.<sup>591</sup> In a similar situation the Mesopotamian scribe did not leave his readers to guess Adapa's priesthood from obscure mythological allusions, as this description of the hero shows:

The capable, the most wise among the Anunnaki is he;  
The blameless, the clean of hands, the ointment priest, the observer of rites.  
With the baker he does the baking, with the bakers of Eridu he does the baking;  
Bread and water for Eridu daily he provides,  
With clean hand(s) he arranges the (offering) table, without him the table cannot be cleared.<sup>592</sup>

We are forced to conclude that *unlike* the Mesopotamian scribe (and Otzen) the Yahwist demonstrates no concern to pronounce on Man's status since he pointedly fails to declare him to be king, priest or any other big-wig. Of course the Yahwist admits that in a very obvious way Man is superior to the other creatures, by having him ascribe to the creatures their names, but that is all. Not even the Yahwist's proposal that Man lived as gardener in Eden can be seen as attributing status, for in the story the word gardener is never used. It is simply a term we ourselves have provided to take account of Adam's employment or way of life as the Yahwist describes it:

And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and keep it.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p. 44.

<sup>589</sup> *ANET* p. 119.

<sup>590</sup> See also Walther Zimmerli *Outline* p. 33: 'The privilege of naming the animals clearly singles out man from the other creatures (Gen 2.20; cf. also 2.23; according to 2 Kings 23.34 and 24.17, the giving of names is the act of a sovereign).

<sup>591</sup> It is certainly true that a conquering king would sometimes change the name of the vassal he left in charge on his departure but it is a big step from this to saying that giving a name is in itself a kingly gesture.

<sup>592</sup> *ANET* p.101

Consequently, unlike Sargon's 'appointment' as Akki's gardener in the Sargon legend, Man's gardening in Genesis 2 does not imply the bestowal of any social position. In fact, the only way the Yahwist is prepared to pronounce upon Man's new circumstances is *ideologically*, since his only declaration is to say that, unlike the animals, Man has 'chosen to know good and evil' (i.e. become ideologically aware). And, of course, as we have already noted, this distinction offers Man neither privilege nor grandeur but only increasing possibilities coupled with responsibility and heartache.

Since it is probable that the Yahwist based his Adam story on the Adapa myth (or perhaps on some other dependent myth which is now lost) any significant changes he made to the general approach must be understood as stemming from some ideological disagreement with his predecessor. The complete absence in the Yahwist's story of the key centrarchic notions of *privilege* and *status*, the function of which is to separate off those at the centre from the rest of society, can therefore only mean that he was working from the opposing god-of-the-marginals perspective.

If what I have written in the last few paragraphs appears in any way controversial it is not because it is at variance with anything in the Yahwist's texts. Rather it is because it flies in the face of traditional exegesis which has been profoundly effected by what is found in Genesis 1. Here it is said in no uncertain terms that Man has been given dominion over creation, thus bestowing on him not the status of manager but rather the status of King! We will be dealing with this revisionist ideology later on. For the time being I would simply ask readers to verify what I have written for themselves, banishing Genesis 1 from their minds.

#### *The Augustinian line*

Traditionally, in describing how the Yahwist envisaged Adam's loss of immortality, the majority of scholars have adopted what could be termed the Augustinian line. Here death is seen as Adam's *punishment* for disobeying Yahweh's strict orders not to aspire to wisdom (by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). Though this sin/punishment-construct displays a certain elegant simplicity it has one serious flaw. Like all moral stories its lesson – a wrong committed, a punishment administered – is numbingly banal and unenlightening. Indeed, though it fits perfectly with the Mesopotamians' centrarchic and authoritarian line, not even they chose to use it in their story. To believe that the Yahwist actually intended such a scenario is therefore to take him for a *small-minded* authoritarian – something which I personally find hard to accept. After all, only a fool would attempt to keep a growing protégé in a nursery of ignorance and punish his adventurous spirit when he naturally sought to cut loose. I find it impossible to believe that the Yahwist was blind to such considerations or that he intended such a portrait. We may be wiser nowadays than the people of his generation about some matters but parenting is not likely to be one of them. Whereas the Mesopotamian scribal writers clearly had a mischievous interest in portraying the military high god Enlil as a crass authoritarian figure who was wont to try and solve

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<sup>593</sup> Gen 2.15

problems by employing bullying tactics,<sup>594</sup> I can find no good reason why the Yahwist would have wanted to portray his ideological champion (the god of the marginals) as a small-minded, authoritarian parent-figure.

### *The Irenean line*

Against this majority view a minority of scholars have taken what could be called an Irenean line.<sup>595</sup> They have claimed that in the Genesis story Adam's loss of immortality is not seen as his punishment for wanting to be wise (an inane suggestion if ever there was one!) but rather an inevitable consequence of his achieving wisdom. In, as it were, 'growing up' and becoming different from the animals (i.e. achieving wisdom in the form of consciousness) Adam quite inevitably also becomes aware of his mortality, because the tragedy is that you can't have one consciousness without the other. In this scenario, therefore, Adam loses his 'immortality' not as a *punishment* but as *an unfortunate, though inevitable, result of achieving consciousness and becoming ideologically aware*.<sup>596</sup> When God *advised* Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree he *explained* that it was because it would result in their death – and he was not lying as the serpent later alleged. In the story, death in the form of an awareness is not God's way of exacting retribution or teaching a lesson. It is rather the painful but inevitable consequence of gaining ideological awakening.<sup>597</sup>

The problem with this understanding is that it postulates a process of 'growing up' or 'naturally evolving' which isn't in the text. What is worse, this new developmental idea actually contradicts the process which is actually present: that of choice. You cannot logically build a story on the twin ideas of natural development and choice because the whole point about natural development is that it takes place regardless of people's choice, while the whole point of choice is that it leads to a development that is artificial, not natural. So while it is certainly true that the Yahwist appears to be talking here about what we call consciousness – a phenomenon which we now understand scientifically as resulting from the natural development of our species – we must be careful not to read the idea of a natural development back into the story itself, since here the logic is spelled out in different terms: those of choice.

### *Our own analysis*

Let us return now to the Genesis story with these alternative readings in mind. When the Yahwist wrote that God told Adam that he must not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, was he implying that it was poisonous? Hardly, for what reason could there be for someone to die from acquiring consciousness?<sup>598</sup> No, if Adam were to die on the spot (which of course he didn't!) it could only be because breaking *a command of God*

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<sup>594</sup> See p. 160 above.

<sup>595</sup> From the 2nd Century theologian.

<sup>596</sup> See for example Davies, *The Bible in Ethics*, (Sheffield: JSOT Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) p.169.

<sup>597</sup> 'It is quite inevitable that the humans will acquire the godlike knowledge of good and evil which will turn them into ethical beings. That is, of course, the point of the story. But the narrator is not telling of a 'fall', or even about the perversion of the god's intentions, but of the birth of humans as ethical agents and the *fulfilment* of the gods' intentions.' Davies, *Ethics*, p. 168.

<sup>598</sup> i.e. an awareness of right and wrong, sex and mortality.

was a capital offence and Yahweh, being a mindless authoritarian, had executed him. The interesting thing is that in reading the story we ‘civilisation people’ naturally tend to see God as authoritarian. We are a bit surprised therefore that Adam, on being found out, isn’t immediately condemned to death and conclude that it must be because Yahweh exercised mercy. However, if you think about it such a reading turns the story into puerile nonsense, for if Yahweh had condemned Adam to death simply for crossing him, he would have shown himself up as morally beyond the pale, even by our own frail human standards. So, on this reading, in *not* condemning Adam Yahweh deserves no more praise from us than a woman who refrains from punishing her son for his natural curiosity.<sup>599</sup> In fact, if we attribute mercy to Yahweh for not condemning Adam then we are simply implying that God’s mercy is no big deal, since all it consists of is acting otherwise than as a small-minded authoritarian.

Perhaps if we refrain from breathing into the Hebrew/marginal story our own civilisation prejudice we will find it making better sense. What the story actually relates is that when Man is presented with the choice of living either in blissful ignorance or, alternatively, with consciousness he chooses the latter. The outcome is that He has to accept *all* the consequences and not blame Yahweh for the downside of the new situation, because the choice he made was *against Yahweh’s will*. Making all due allowances for our own preference for the logic of evolution this unprejudiced reading of the text sees it as making extremely good sense. We all at times hanker after our former ideology-free existence. Indeed every time we declare that we cannot be bothered with ideology we do just that, and the Yahwist’s story simply reminds us that we cannot accept the advantages of our position and all the new possibilities it opens up without accepting the disadvantages as well. It will be noted that in this reading of the texts the business of disobedience is not seen as leading naturally to an expectation of authoritarian punishment. That is something which we civilisation folk read into the text and it is quite crass. For though we often talk about life punishing people (e.g. the Sargon chronicler’s description of Marduk’s destruction of the Akkadian empire because Sargon had committed sacrilege in destroying his temple in Babylon) the truth is that we know it to be nonsense. The fact is that the only way of talking sensibly about life punishing is when people use their ideological powers to exploit their environment, only to find it biting back, as for example when farmers greedily try to maximise the production of their fields only to end up destroying the soil. This, of course, is exactly the sort of logic we find in the Yahwist’s text. It tells us that having chosen awareness over against blissful ignorance Man finds himself in a position in which he is obliged to accept responsibility for his new situation, which has a downside as well as an upside. For, as well as the ability to understand and so increasingly to gain control over our environment, consciousness brings with it an alarming awareness of our many frailties, self-centeredness, and absence of worth.

In spelling out the consequences of Adam’s ‘choice’,<sup>600</sup> the myth not only recounts how Yahweh confirmed Man’s dawning awareness of his mortality – which is

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<sup>599</sup> ‘I suppose that if one treats this story as an allegory of child-rearing one can unravel the paradox: before they are old enough to act ethically, children are subject to commands from their parents, who may punish disobedience. But here, too, obedience is a *pre-ethical* response, and punishment for disobedience ethically reprehensible, even though parents usually indulge in it.’ Davies, *Ethics*, p. 169

<sup>600</sup> Gen 3.14-24.

perfectly in order and to be expected<sup>601</sup> – but also announces a series of curses<sup>602</sup> which terminate in Man’s expulsion from the garden.<sup>603</sup> Given all that has been said about our normally authoritarian approach to the text it is hardly surprising to discover that scholars have traditionally taken these curses as punishments or penalties designed to bring about correction.<sup>604</sup> However, the truth is that there can be no idea of correction here since the whole point about a curse pronounced by God is that it constitutes a doom that is both unpleasant and *irreversible*.<sup>605</sup> Even the idea of penalty is misplaced, since a penalty is an artificial misfortune imposed over and above the damage which a misdemeanour of itself inflicts on a miscreant by way of his/her loss of honour and standing in the community. What is more, in being aetiological explanations these particular curses are clearly supposed to be seen as logical consequences and not as artificial impositions. In other words God is not presented here as maliciously laying supplementary burdens on his creatures. Rather he is pictured as pointing out what these creatures have now to assume, given the choices they have just made against his will. We, of course, would have preferred to have had the matter expressed in our own scientific logic: as the necessity of coming to terms with the drawbacks as well as the advantages of the situation which natural selection has bestowed on us; but, even expressed in the terms of free choice, it is adequately clear what the ancient writer was driving at. Understood as punishments, on the other hand, these curses diminish the story and render its meaning fatuous by giving Yahweh the appearance of an authoritarian simpleton. So once again an unprejudiced reading of the text shows that there is nothing in the story itself to justify the authoritarian or civilisational reading which sees Yahweh as punishing Adam and Eve for refusing him his proper place as the boss.

Since the story itself gives us no reason to suppose that Yahweh was an authoritarian God we have only ourselves to blame for reading it in such a manner. For though it is certainly *possible* to read Genesis 2-3 as being about sin and punishment, as the great majority of people unthinkingly do, it leads to a quite unnecessary trivialisation of the story. Why, then, have countless generations of Jewish and Christian teachers followed this line, inflicting a degraded reading on others? Common experience shows that, in our civilisation, teaching and authoritarianism naturally go hand in hand, so the surprise is that *some* teachers are not authoritarian, not that *most* of them are. This simple, if infinitely regrettable, fact of itself is well able to account for the dominance in our culture of the pernicious Augustinian interpretation of this Genesis myth.<sup>606</sup> If we

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<sup>601</sup> Gen 3.19b

<sup>602</sup> Gen 3.14-19a

<sup>603</sup> Gen 3.22-24

<sup>604</sup> ‘The penalties (in Gen 3.14-15) go in reversed order to the trial proceedings. These penalties are all to be understood aetiologically.’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 92 ‘The god then, apparently, punishes and prevents further encroachments on his monopoly of power. But the objects of his curse are all his own creatures, whom he has himself endowed.’ Davies, *Ethics*, p. 168.

<sup>605</sup> ‘For the ancients, the curse was much more than an evil wish. By virtue of the effective power it was believed to possess, it brought about disastrous, irreparable situations.’ Von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 93

<sup>606</sup> ‘To read the chapters 3-4 (in the book of Genesis) in terms of sin-punishment, which is the most usual interpretation among biblical critics, is to misconceive entirely the level at which the narrative operates. It is not concerned essentially with the moral dimension of the human act, seen as disobedience or ‘sin’, but with the *motive* and *consequence* of that act’ Davies, *A Word in Season: Essays in Honour of William McKane*, (Sheffield: JSOT Sheffield Academic Press, 1986) p. 43.

presume from the outset that Yahweh is not authoritarian (being, as we ourselves suspect, the god of the marginals) then his words about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil could only be a warning that the day on which Adam achieves consciousness by eating its fruit he will also inevitably become aware of his own mortality. But why on earth didn't the Yahwist make his meaning more plain and save us all this trouble? Well, the fact is that he probably did. What we have to understand is that he was writing not for 'civilisation people' like ourselves who have authoritarianism drilled into us from birth, and so 'on the brain'. He was writing, if not actually for Hebrew outcasts, then at least for an anti-authoritarian community which had not altogether forgotten its past. We also have to understand that ancient writers, lacking our sophisticated psychological vocabulary, had no way of expressing quite ordinary psychological phenomena such as 'thinking', 'achieving consciousness' or 'becoming aware of one's mortality'. They were obliged to express everything concretely. Consequently for 'she thought' they naturally wrote 'she said to herself', whereas for 'she achieved consciousness' they wrote 'she ate of the tree of the knowledge' and for 'she will become aware of her mortality' they simply wrote 'she will die'. This is why, in spelling out the consequences of Man's action (in choosing consciousness over against blissful ignorance) God tells Adam (what in fact Adam now has already come to realise for himself) 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.' It's as simple as that. Consequently, the fact that neither Adam nor Eve, on eating the fruit, are immediately put to death does not mean – as Old Testament scholars are wont to suppose – that the serpent spoke the truth and God lied,<sup>607</sup> or alternatively that God had had a sudden change of heart.<sup>608</sup> All it means is that we 'civilisation people' should be more critical of our own authoritarian prejudices and have a little more sense when reading ancient texts: making proper allowances for ancient people's ways of expressing themselves, given their restricted vocabulary.

What, then, is to be said about Adam's and Eve's expulsion from Eden? Up till this point we have adopted a negative approach, emphasising first the insurmountable difficulties created by our 'civilisation', authoritarian reading of the text with its pattern of sin and punishment, and only then suggesting what an unprejudiced reading of the story reveals. This has been necessary because of the sheer dominance within our own tradition of the pernicious Augustinian line which makes it almost impossible for people nowadays to even seriously consider that the story could be read otherwise

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<sup>607</sup> 'The woman's choice, which is paramount here, is also between two propositions: she will die the day she eats (says the god), and she will become like the god (says the snake). Her choice is dictated not by a negative impulse to disobey but by a real dilemma, and she follows the evidence of her own desire, the pleasant appearance of the tree, and the eloquence of the snake. And as it happens, she apparently chooses the true proposition (the words of the snake) rather than the false one (Yahweh's), since her eyes *are* opened and she does *not* die 'that day'.' Indeed, it is Yahweh himself who acknowledges that she has chosen the true proposition.' Davies, *Ethics*, p. 168 'The conflict in the narrative begins because Yahweh has lied to the human being about the nature of the *tree of wisdom*, and has declared that it is a *tree of death*.' T. L. Thompson *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1987) p. 203.

<sup>608</sup> 'The direct connection of this passage (Gen 3) with the threat of death in ch. 2.17 is also difficult, for its meaning was not, "on that day you will become mortal," but rather, "you will die." But that did not happen at all. And one of the narrator's concerns may have been to show that God did not make good his terrible threat but had allowed grace to prevail.' Van Seters *Prologue*.

than as God's punishment of Man for slighting his authority.<sup>609</sup> However, it will now be necessary to change tactics. This is because of the piecemeal and developing way in which the biblical text of Genesis 2-11 seems to have been constructed. By this I do not simply mean that the Yahwist constructed his myth by stitching together various traditional stories, for this is equally true of the Mesopotamian Adapa myth. Indeed, all ancient myths were probably built from pre-existing traditional material. However, whereas most myths, such as the Adapa story (and indeed the priestly creation myth in Genesis 1) come to us as carefully constructed individual works of art, those of the Yahwist<sup>610</sup> are presented as loosely strung-together arguments situated within an extended ideological treatise. Because of this there is considerably less integrity within the individual stories themselves, which both blur into one another at their edges and internally demonstrate visible inconsistencies between the building blocks out of which they have been made.<sup>611</sup> This complication makes it necessary for us to adopt a positive approach from now on by postulating the central line of thought which the Yahwist is following. For only by doing so will we be able to make sense of the way in which the writer twists and turns the story as his argument develops.

Our hypothesis is that the Yahwist's intention was to use the foreign, centrarchical, mythological material he had to hand, to set out an alternative god-of-the-marginals ideology. To start off with, he adopts the basic outline of the well known Mesopotamian Adapa story in which an ideological justification is given for Man's obviously special position within the universe as the only mortal creature ('animal') endowed with consciousness. He seeks first to 'correct' the ideology by altering the basic creator/creature relationship. In the Adapa story this relationship is centrarchical. The universe, including all the animals, is conceived of as a huge estate created and owned by the gods and managed and run by Man on their behalf, to satisfy their needs. The Yahwist changes all of this by getting rid of the centrarchical relationship. He does this not by making creator and creature equal - as we might foolishly have been tempted to do - but by changing the relationship from that of greedy, cosmic 'top dog' towards the insignificant underling, to that of needless, metacosmic goodwill towards the protégé. Consequently, in his story Man is not set in charge of a huge estate with orders to see to it that the boundless needs of the gods are supplied. Rather he is given a garden so that he can satisfy his own needs by tilling the ground and making it fruitful. In addition he is given all the other beasts for company but because these are not truly at his level God provides him finally with his other half: Woman. This done, Yahweh simply wanders down from time to time to find out how his protégés are getting along. With Man's obvious intermediary position within the universe<sup>612</sup> thus

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<sup>609</sup> 'The god then, apparently, punishes and prevents further encroachment on his monopoly of power.' Davies, *Ethics*, p. 168. 'Even God's withholding of the tree of life is a precaution not without a double meaning. Certainly it is first a punishment and a new sealing of man's destined death.' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 97

<sup>610</sup> Basically Gen 2-4, 6-9 & 11.

<sup>611</sup> Von Rad lists numerous inconsistencies in what he terms The Story of the Fall (Gen 3): Eve is described as Adam's wife before sexual knowledge comes about, the earth is watered by ground water as by the two rivers, the woman is given two names Eve and Woman, Eden is both to the north and to the east of Palestine, Eden is Paradise but also just a garden, Man is punished by death as by expulsion, God has two names Yahweh and Elohim. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 99

<sup>612</sup> Obvious, that is, to ancient man who never doubted the existence of the gods.



satisfactorily dealt with in terms of the Yahwist's own non-marginalizing ideology, so far so good!

The question now for the Yahwist is how to explain Man's mortality, which he shares with the other creatures, given his possession of the godly attribute of wisdom.<sup>613</sup> The first thing he has to do, of course, is to purge this wisdom-concept of the centrarchical colouring which the Mesopotamian myth-maker laid upon it when he understood it in terms of administrative skills. The Yahwist does this by redefining it as a knowledge which, once acquired, brings a knowing of good and evil. The thing which is really significant is that the Yahwist rejects the centrarchical notion that this characteristic is a natural attribute of Man, built into him by the gods so that he may carry out his centrarchical job on their behalf. For the Yahwist, this characteristic of wisdom or knowledge is something which Man chooses to acquire. Furthermore, as a characteristic it comes not as an isolated realisation but as a complete 'consciousness package' involving not just a narrow ideological awareness but also an awareness of death and sex, and indeed everything between, including the drudgery of work, the pain of childbearing and an animosity towards snakes – hence the curses.

At this point it seems to me that a word of warning is on order. In pondering the Yahwist's story it is important to follow his line of thought by taking account of what he says and that we should not try to make something from what he does not say. What he says is that Adam and Eve ate the fruit and their eyes were opened. From this it is safe to infer that he believed that mankind, in becoming ideologically aware, at the same time became sexually aware and also aware of death. It is, however, not safe to infer that he believed there was a time when humans were immortal beings since, if he thought something so foolish, he would have indicated it by telling us that there were two trees in the garden; the tree of knowledge *and* the tree of life, and he doesn't, for, as we shall see presently, the tree of life only enters the story later on.<sup>614</sup> We have to remember that this myth is not a polished work of art within which we can wander about at will. Rather it is an ideological treatise which develops, and we must carefully follow the development and not construct our own surmises.

With the expulsion in Genesis 3.22 we find ourselves facing a new seam and twist in the story, accompanied by the introduction of a new and unexpected mythological representation: the tree of life.<sup>615</sup> The problem the Yahwist is facing at this point in his story is the fact that the garden, which was a very suitable scenario for Man's pre-awareness innocence, is an unsuitable backcloth for new, ideologically aware, conscious Man. He is therefore obliged to find some reason for Yahweh to chase Man out into the big outside world. He cannot suggest that this act was a punishment (which

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<sup>613</sup> The Yahwist does not question this feature of the Adapa story, as we might for scientific reasons, believing, as we tend to, that wisdom is just a developed sophistication which might someday be built even into a machine.

<sup>614</sup> The tree of life is mentioned in Gen 2.9 but this is generally taken to be a late editorial addition. See e.g. Von Rad, *Genesis* p. 78-9. It does not effectively enter the story until Gen 3.22 in the expulsion scene. It is said in 2.9 to stand in the midst of the garden yet in 3.3 the tree in the midst of the garden is said to be the tree of knowledge.

<sup>615</sup> 'In v. 22 we come across fresh difficulties. The verse concerns the tree of life, which is obviously strange to the context of vs. 1-19. We now hear more about man's expulsion from the garden, which is repeated immediately in v. 24. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 97.

of course is what traditional commentators say it was, even though no such suggestion is to be found in the text) because this would undermine everything which he has so far achieved. Technically, he manages it in verse 22 with the sudden introduction of the tree of life. From every aspect this is a remarkably summary and unconvincing job, which demonstrates just how unconcerned the Yahwist was to produce a polished work of art worthy of civilisation.<sup>616</sup> The new tree is introduced simply as a convenient excuse for Yahweh to expel Adam and Eve from the garden: the logic being that if Yahweh let them stay they then might also eat its fruit and so live for ever and that would never do! However, though the myth lacks something of polish and sophistication it is a masterpiece of ideological penetration and it would be foolish to simply write off these closing verses as a ham-fisted way of tying up the story's loose ends. One important thing they do is to define Adam and Eve as marginals – no accident I assure you. The result of this definition is that the reader can no longer take these personages as representatives of all of mankind, which is certainly what they were in the beginning of the story. Now they can only be Israel; a community of people who, having been forced out of the civilised areas of the ancient Near East, where irrigation methods of farming made life relatively easy, was forced to scrape a living in the refuge zone of the Palestinian highlands where the earth could only be rendered productive by extreme and incessant labour.<sup>617</sup> But that is not all. As a result of this dramatic switch one further significant symbolic change takes place. The garden, which up till now has represented a protected state of bliss for the innocent, now becomes something rather different: a leisured environment, ideologically dangerous for Israel as Yahweh's chosen servant.<sup>618</sup> As such, God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden is no longer Man's loss of Paradise but instead *a necessary action taken for Israel's ideological good*. It is an interesting fact that this same garden of Eden is occasionally used elsewhere in the Jewish Bible, normally in the first sense as Paradise.<sup>619</sup> However, on the one occasion when the Yahwist uses it again himself – in the Sodom and Gomorrah story<sup>620</sup> – it is once again as a dangerous place for Israel, where ideological perversion is rampant *and a specific connection is made with Egypt*.<sup>621</sup>

### *The sex marker*

One intriguing aspect of the Adam and Eve myth that we have not yet dealt with is the interest in nakedness, clothes and sexual awareness. It is fairly obvious why the Yahwist was keen to associate ideological awareness with mortality since this was all part of the central conundrum which the Adapa myth posed. But there is nothing about sex in the Adapa myth so it will be interesting to see if we can find out why the

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<sup>616</sup> Here again seams are visible, but they do not release us from the duty of expounding the text in its present form in spite of the remarkably difficult anacoluthon. (Compare the “also” in v.22b!)’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 97.

<sup>617</sup> See Adam's curse: Gen 3.17-19.

<sup>618</sup> Von Rad suggests that there are signs that the Yahwist composed his myth from several stories and that one was about Paradise and the other about a garden. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 99

<sup>619</sup> Is 51.3; Ezek 28.13, 31.8; Joel 2.3.

<sup>620</sup> Gen 13.10.

<sup>621</sup> The Yahwist takes up this idea of Eden/Egypt as an ideologically dangerous place for Israel in his murmuring narratives in which the people in their physical distress toy with the idea of giving up and returning to the fleshpots in Egypt (Ex 16.3 etc.). See Deut 17.16b.

Yahwist thought it was necessary to bring it into *his* story. We could of course have argued that the whole business of growing up and maturing was germane to the advent of human consciousness, had we not been forced to reject the idea on account of the fact that the story works on the completely different logic of choice, and that while the idea of natural development is crucial to our way of thinking it wasn't to that of ancient men and women. The undeniable truth is that there is no more question of growing up and maturing in this myth than there is of sin and punishment, so we cannot use either of them in understanding how it works. Why then has the Yahwist gone out of his way to introduce the idea of sexual awareness into his story? Why is it that on achieving ideological awareness Adam and Eve are struck down, not simply by a sudden consciousness of their mortality but also by a sudden and rather inexplicable concern about their nakedness? It must be as a result of some important consideration, since the feature resurfaces repeatedly.<sup>622</sup>

The fact is, of course, that in human thinking political/moral/ethical considerations are always seen as closely related with sexual matters. Today we try to keep sex in its place, insisting that there is more to politics, ethics and morality than pricks, boobs and bums. Is not this of itself a witness to the fact that it is all too easy to assume all morality, ethics and politics under the umbrella of sex? This is precisely what the Yahwist did when he spoke of the result of eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in terms of sexual awareness – sex being an umbrella for all things ideological. And it works magnificently. Indeed this sex-marker, in which a writer identifies and deals with ideological matters – so difficult for an ancient writer to handle – under the umbrella of sex, becomes a favourite representational tool used repeatedly by the Yahwist as well as by other (later?) biblical writers. Of course, as gentrified, 'civilisation men and women' we find all of this difficult to handle. Hardly surprising therefore that biblical scholars have tried repeatedly to identify some act of immorality within the Adam and Eve story for God to punish.<sup>623</sup> Unfortunately for them there isn't any!

OK so sex and politics have always been closely intertwined but why was it necessary for the Yahwist to speak about political matters using sexual terminology? Wasn't it bound to confuse people? To understand the reason it is necessary to take into account the difference between what I call Category 1 and Category 2 offences. Mesopotamian societies habitually measured the seriousness of a crime not simply in terms of the material damage caused to the innocent party but also in terms of the unseen damage inflicted on the centrarchal system itself – as can be seen in this law taken from the Code of Hammurabi:

If a seignior stole either an ox or a sheep or an ass or a pig or a boat, if it belonged to god [i.e. the church] (or) if it belonged to the palace [i.e. the state], he shall make thirtyfold restitution; if it belonged to a private citizen, he shall make good tenfold.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> 3.7, 3.10, 3.11, 3.21.

<sup>623</sup> Van Seters makes no bones about it: 'The evidence of a misdeed is cited – the nakedness of the pair ... – which leads to an admission of guilt. ... The pronouncement of punishment ... is in the form of a curse.' *Prologue*. Claus Westerman is more nuanced: 'What was right beforehand (i.e. nakedness) is now wrong' *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) p. 251. He does not seem to understand that such a change would imply an inadmissible change in Yahweh's character.

<sup>624</sup> *ANET*, p.166.

It would seem therefore that for Mesopotamian law makers there were ordinary Category Two offences (stealing animals from other citizens) but there were also ideological or Category One crimes (stealing animals from the temple or palace).

The Yahwist, too, makes this distinction between ordinary and ideological offences. For him it was a Category One perversion to behave as if specific people or groups were useless and did not count. Such an offence was not just ideological but unpardonable because it constituted an insult to Yahweh's defining political character. In other words, since Yahweh's function as the god of the marginals was in every situation to prioritise those people who were trashed, if ever people acted to marginalise others they thereby committed a Category One, unpardonable offence.

As far as we can tell from the written records we possess, the Israelites were unique in taking such a stance. All the other people we know about in the ancient Near East (i.e. the civilised, centrarchal societies) believed it was perfectly right and natural to consider that some people counted more than others, as the Code of Hammurabi testifies to on numerous occasions.<sup>625</sup> So, while Category Two crimes were condemned equally strongly by all societies, Israel alone cherished a unique awareness that *marginalization* was the Category One offence. In the stories in Genesis 2-11 the Yahwist rather neatly indicates the special nature of what Israel considered to be ideological misdemeanour by the use of two interconnected principles:

- Of all crimes, *only* ideological misdemeanours merit the death penalty.
- Ideological misdemeanours *invariably* merit the death penalty.

Of course it would have made things much simpler for us if the Yahwist had given a special name to ideological misdemeanours as I have. However, lacking our analytical approach the Israelites only had one word in their vocabulary to cover *all* misdemeanours: *sin*. Since this was the case it was crucially important for the Yahwist to have at his disposition some way of signalling to his readers when he was referring to ordinary sin on the one hand and when to Category One ideological sin on the other; for in his eyes the difference was crucial. As a result he hit upon the *sex-marker* technique, which consisted of identifying and discussing Category One sins by talking about them (from our point of view somewhat bizarrely) in sexual terms, sex being an excellent indicator of the strong feelings involved in ideological matters, as well as providing a concrete and easily handled scenario.

Unfortunately, the Yahwist's use of this sex-marker technique has only further complicated matters for us because, long ago, commentators on the Bible got into the habit of taking what he wrote literally! Not only has this obscured the Yahwist's true concerns but it has also given rise to the ridiculous idea that he was obsessed with sexual matters. This is not to deny that the Israelites had strong views on the subject. Only on this basis would a language of sexual behaviour have proved adequate for expressing the Yahwist's horror of ideological deviation. However, given the new

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<sup>625</sup> If a seignior has knocked out a tooth of a seignior of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth. If he has knocked out a commoner's tooth, he shall pay one-third mina of silver. If he has struck the cheek of a seignior who is superior to him, he shall be beaten sixty (times) with an oxtail whip in the assembly. Laws 200-202 in the code of Hammurabi *ANET*, p.175.

understanding: that the Israelites were themselves largely Canaanites, not nomadic incomers with a completely distinct cultural identity, we have to understand this moralistic attitude to sexual behaviour as something generally shared by *all* the inhabitants of Canaan, including Israel's centrarchal opponents. This being the case we have to understand Israel's criticism of the centrarchal practice of cultic prostitution – the subject which always comes up when biblical commentators are out to demonstrate the sexual perfidy of the Canaanites – as ideological rather than moralistic. In other words Israel saw the practice quite differently from the way we do; they saw it not as sexual perversion but as a horrifying attempt to control and manipulate the life processes over which Yahweh had sole charge. I conclude therefore that thought undeniably the Yahwist writes a lot about sex in the book of Genesis it should be understood for what it is: a language technique for discussing ideological perversion and not an obsession with peoples' interest in bottoms.

### *The corporate personality*

Along with myth the sex-marker is not the only representational literary-form used in the Adam and Eve story. We also find the Yahwist making use of the corporate personality. Because, given the absence of an extensive political vocabulary, it was difficult for people in the ancient world to describe the actions and history of whole communities this was done by telling stories about individuals, an individual been seen as representing a community as a whole. For example, in the Garden of Eden myth it is clear that Adam (like his predecessor Adapa) is seen, at least at the outset, as representing Mankind – as indeed his name indicates. This is such a well understood phenomenon I only mention it to reinforce my thesis that in the biblical texts the mythological superstructure exists as but one representational technique among many.

### *The fall?*

Given the above findings what can we say about the traditional interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve as Man's 'fall'? Clearly the Yahwist would have agreed that all humans have a natural propensity to sin - understood both as Category Two common selfishness and hatred<sup>626</sup> and as Category One ideological hubris.<sup>627</sup> So there is no reason to suppose that he would have had any objection to the notion as such.<sup>628</sup> However, there would be no sense in trying to establish it by referring to this particular story since *the idea of wrongdoing isn't even present within it*, let alone its principal point.<sup>629</sup> Worse still, it distracts attention from the story's real subject – ideological

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<sup>626</sup> i.e. Giving way to your natural aspirations or animosities by riding roughshod over others in a thirst for self-fulfilment or punishing them for daring to rival you

<sup>627</sup> i.e. Justifying this cavalier behaviour by contemptuously assuming that *some people are more important than others*.

<sup>628</sup> For us the notion of a 'fall' has the drawback of suggesting a previously 'unfallen' condition for which there is no scientific evidence. However, the Yahwist did not share our scientific interest. His myths are descriptive not analytic.

<sup>629</sup> '... It is in fact difficult to establish, rather than merely presuppose, that Gen. 2-3 narrates Eve's and Adam's behaviour in terms of wickedness, or indeed that the Eden episode is presented in such terms. Rather the acts of Adam and Eve are described in terms of the acquisition, contrary to the divine intention, of a divine quality of knowledge, which is better seen as a *precondition* of the development of human "wickedness".' Davies, *Word*, p. 43

awareness – which is a matter of some importance. People who speak about the fall seldom admit that it is a late interpretation of the myth invented by the early Church. Indeed it only came into existence as a result of seeing Christ as the one *who saves us all* and therefore as the one who undid what Adam *wrought for us all*. Paul, Augustine and those who followed in the ‘fall’ tradition (which is to say most Christians writers bar Irenaeus and a few others) may have been right in what they claimed Christ did for mankind. However, in terms of understanding what the Adam and Eve myth was all about they couldn’t have been more wrong.<sup>630</sup> In fact they have managed over the years to make such an almighty mess of the myth’s meaning that it is perhaps wishful thinking to believe that anyone can now clear it up. Still, we are obliged to try!

### *Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16)*

#### *The Dimuzi and Enkimdu myth as a comparison*

There is a common class of Mesopotamian literature called ‘disputation compositions’ in which two parties – usually animals or objects – argue about which of them is superior. The piece usually ends with some recognised authority acting as referee to decide who has won. The following story, of the rivalry of Dimuzi the shepherd god and Enkimdu the farmer god for the hand of Inanna the goddess of love, is not a straight disputation composition but a myth couched in the disputation form. In outline the story goes like this:

Inanna is out in the fields when Utu the sun god approaches her. Acting as Dimuzi’s emissary he upbraids her for not being willing to marry the shepherd god and he goes on to strongly recommend Dimuzi’s suit. But Inanna replies that she will not marry Dimuzi for she prefers Enkimdu. Since Utu has failed to make an impression Dimuzi tries pressing his suit for himself. He tells her that whatever Enkimdu has to offer he is well able to equal it. Apparently his efforts are rewarded for the next thing we hear is that Dimuzi is rejoicing on the river bank when Enkimdu approaches him. Dimuzi immediately tries to start a quarrel but Enkimdu tells him that he holds nothing against him and that Dimuzi is free to let his sheep graze on his riverbank and in his meadows and to drink the water from his irrigation canals. Dimuzi is at once reconciled and promptly invites Enkimdu to the wedding whereupon Enkimdu begins to discuss the presents he will bring.

This story is not about the winning of Inanna since the climax comes *after* she has been won. Neither is it about who is more worthy to win Inanna’s hand since Enkimdu never concedes that Dimuzi is the *better* man but declares that there is no contest. So since Enkimdu clearly represents the agricultural community and Dimuzi the shepherds (as corporate personalities) the myth has to be about *the need for differing economic sectors to temper their natural inclination to defend their self-interests lest the petty jealousies that naturally arise as a result of economic diversification should tear the community apart*.

#### *Cain’s act is not a Category 1 sin*

Comparing this with the Cain myth we are at once struck by two important differences between the general outlines of the stories. First, though Abel (like Dimuzi) is a shepherd and Cain (like Enkimdu) is a farmer there is little to suggest that either of

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<sup>630</sup> A point also made by T. L. Thompson see *Origin* p. 206.

them function as corporate personalities for they are neither designated as gods nor do their professional statuses play a significant role in the story. Second, it is doubtful if we should even talk of protagonists here since Abel has no role in the story except to get murdered. As his name suggests (Abel = ephemeral) he is only there to get blown away. This being so, it is plainly out of the question that the Cain myth shares either the subject matter or general approach of the Dimuzi/Enkimdu myth. Though the element of economic diversification between shepherds and agriculturists is certainly present in the Cain story,<sup>631</sup> it would seem that the Yahwist has only introduced it in order to clarify the motive for the murder. By it he indicates that the quarrel between Cain and Abel issued very generally from the kind of jealousies and rivalries that are inevitably present where economic or geographic divisions exist. In short, the Yahwist is letting us know that the quarrel we are dealing with here – though it results in a terrible crime – is at bottom an act of Category Two collective selfishness and hatred, not of Category One ideological hubris and contempt.

You may well find such a conclusion hard to swallow, given the judgements traditionally made about Cain's action in killing his brother.<sup>632</sup> Clearly, most biblical scholars see it as a Category One offence. So let me offer two bits of evidence which demonstrate that, on the contrary, we find ourselves obliged to see it as an example of Category Two, collective selfishness and hatred.

1. The Yahwist *systematically* indicates the presence of Category One offences by using a sex marker. Here there is none.
2. The Yahwist *systematically* considers death as the only appropriate punishment for Category One crimes. Here he tells us that Yahweh placed a mark on Cain *specifically* to discourage anyone from carrying out such a punishment.

Von Rad calls Yahweh's protection of Cain in this manner 'incomprehensible'<sup>633</sup> and the text which reports it as 'enigmatic',<sup>634</sup> comments which strike me as perverse: an indication of his obstinate unwillingness to take seriously the direction in which the text is driving. Van Seters, for his part, calls Yahweh's behaviour 'divine mitigation',<sup>635</sup> thereby indicating that it should be understood as an act of mercy needing no explanation. This too is a feeble cop-out, as is demonstrated by the flood myth which follows. Here Yahweh certainly relents and promises to withdraw the death penalty but only in the case of *future* ideological crimes and *only* after he has destroyed 99.999 percent of the human race. I see no great evidence of mercy or divine mitigation there. But doesn't the fact that Cain's sin stems from an offering made to God indicate a Category One crime, as von Rad seems to suggest?

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<sup>631</sup> Von Rad claims this diversification is exaggerated by the offering of sacrifices on separate altars. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.104.

<sup>632</sup> 'God's judgement on the fratricide is more terrible than the punishment in Ch. 3. Something that could not be made good again, something that ancient man found much more terrible had happened.' von Rad, *Genesis*, p.106. 'This is actually the first picture of man after he was expelled from Paradise, and the picture is a terrible one. Sin has grown like an avalanche.' Von Rad, *Genesis* p.108.

<sup>633</sup> '... because of his murder [Cain] is cursed by separation from God and yet incomprehensibly guarded and supported by God's protection.' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 107.

<sup>634</sup> 'That [Cain] is not abandoned by God but lives expressly in a protective relationship is the most enigmatic part of the narrative ...' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 109.

<sup>635</sup> 'In Cain's case, the mitigation of the death threat to the fugitive comes as a response to his complaint and in the form of a sign.' Van Seters, *Prologue*, p. 140.

The terribleness of Cain's sin lies in the fact that it does not catch him in a condition of separation from God, i.e., where he forgets himself in human life, but precisely at the point where he lifts his hands to God, at the altar. [as Luther wrote] 'In political anger there is still some trace of human nature .... there is not such fury in political anger. Pharisaical rage is clearly diabolical rage'.<sup>636</sup>

I admit that I too thought this might be the case until I noticed the absence of the sex marker and the exclusion of the death penalty. The horrible truth then slowly began to dawn on me. What the Yahwist seeks to demonstrate in his myth – and what we don't want to hear – is that *the sins which we civilisation folk instinctively classify as diabolical and unforgivable are by no means so but that our own god-fearing judgements on the people who commit them are!*<sup>637</sup>

#### *The mark of Cain as the crux of the story*

When Yahweh spells out to Cain what the inevitable consequence of his action will be, telling him that by killing his brother he has forfeited his right to live in society and made himself a marginal, Cain declares in anguish 'My punishment is greater than I can bear'. Once again it is necessary to point out that you can use our word punishment in connection with this myth only if you keep it firmly in your head that Yahweh does not inflict any additional hurt on Cain, as a judge does in a court of Law when he finds the prisoner guilty.<sup>638</sup> Indeed, when Yahweh takes action it is to put his mark upon Cain – so that *no one* can claim the right to inflict such additional hurt in his name!

We can tell that this marking of Cain constitutes the crux of the story from the general disarray it causes amongst interpreters. The first thing to note is that the mark is not intended as a sign of disgrace but as a means of protection. It is a warning to anyone who takes it upon him or herself to exact retribution against Cain that such an act would constitute a Category One, ideological crime of hubris and contempt (the only crime within these mythological texts for which death is the penalty).<sup>639</sup> For such an act would be tantamount to declaring that Cain is a valueless piece of human scum. It seems to me that *this action of Yahweh, with its accompanying pronouncement, constitutes the clearest expression of the god-of-the-marginals idea one could possibly wish for.*

However, if it is true the myth defends the god-of-the-marginals' principle why does it content itself with a *negative* instruction: that no one should slay Cain? Why does it not *positively* declare that society should continue to find a place for him in its midst - i.e.: love him? From the Yahwist's point of view such a declaration would have been self-defeating since his intention was not to define how Israelite society should conduct

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<sup>636</sup> Luther WA, XLII, p.193. Von Rad *Genesis*, p.109

<sup>637</sup> I find Luther's distinction between political anger and Pharisaical rage, as quoted by von Rad above, appropriate but only on the understanding that Cain's fury was *not* Pharisaical rage. I find Luther's vocabulary confusing since what he means by 'political' anger I would term Category 2 party-political or collective selfishness - which is to say an exact description of Cain's motivation. Alternatively, what he means by 'Pharisaical' rage I would characterise as anger arising from ideological waywardness: the sort of anger which causes one to trash people. We only encounter this ideological sin and its extraordinary effect on Yahweh in the next myth.

<sup>638</sup> Von Rad's whole exposition of this myth depends on seeing Yahweh acting as judge and jury: a fatal error.

<sup>639</sup> Surely this point *proves* that Cain's sin was not ideological.



itself but to make the point that, though Israel's political situation had changed (she was no longer a community of fugitive marginals) Yahweh's political character had not. Consequently he draws a picture of Cain as the marginal in Israel's midst and has Yahweh declare that Cain belongs *naturally* to him *as no one else in the community now does*. In doing this he makes it quite clear that Yahweh continues to maintain his priorities which have nothing to do with Cain's merit, of course, but everything to do with his *social status* as an outcast.

### *P's revision of the story*

It is interesting to note that this fundamental principle, that the man-slayer belongs to Yahweh and that no one has the right to take up justice against him, is later flatly contradicted by the revisionist priestly writer:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image. And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it.<sup>640</sup>

This text makes one thing very clear. The priestly writer's notion of man as made in the image of God – the *imago Dei* – far from being an idea which naturally arose out of the god-of-the-marginals principle, was reintroduced<sup>641</sup> specifically to subvert it – albeit surreptitiously ('be fruitful' declares P as over against J who declares 'make the earth fruitful'). Its purpose was to cover up the god-of-the-marginals by superimposing the opposing centrarchal principle of *dominance*: Man rightly is the boss because he is made in God's image. As such, the *imago Dei* exactly parallels the idea of *priesthood* in the Adapa myth, its function is to justify Man's superior status and rightfully condescending attitude towards the other animals. As an idea it is, of course, of great comfort to civilisation people like ourselves since it acts to validate our ancient habit of killing for food.<sup>642</sup> It mercifully deals with any feelings of guilt which consciousness provokes in us in this regard. However, I am far from certain people have been right in pretending that our killing of animals is justified, whereas their killing of us is not, *because we are supposedly made in God's image*.<sup>643</sup> Sounds to me like special pleading! Of course, Jewish and Christian teachers have often tried to justify the *imago Dei* by pointing out that it establishes the foundational principle of *the sanctity of human life*. But the fact is that even if we leave to one side the question as to the validity of the notion of sanctity you don't need the idea of the *imago Dei* to establish that it is inexcusable for one person to take the life of another. The god-of-the-marginals notion does this perfectly adequately since taking the life of another – in so far as it is reprehensible<sup>644</sup> – is simply an extreme form of dust-binning.

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<sup>640</sup> Gen 9.6-7.

<sup>641</sup> It was already to be found clearly expressed in a number of Sumerian creation myths. See Kramer *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) p.150.

<sup>642</sup> Notice that in both creation stories the animals are not given to humans as food Adam and Eve being vegetarians.

<sup>643</sup> e.g. the goring Ox in Ex 21.28

<sup>644</sup> The *imago Dei* principle ordains that the killing of another is always wrong, except in the case of a judicial act. Situation ethics, on the contrary, seeks to show that on rare occasions the killing of another is the right thing to do. The god-of-the-marginals notion avoids this contradiction since the rightful killings highlighted by situation ethics never constitute trashings.

### *The curse of exclusion*

One more feature of this *Cain and Abel* story deserves our attention: the curse of exclusion. In order to appreciate its full impact it is necessary to take account of what we have said as regards the figure of Adam as a corporate personality. At the beginning of the Garden of Eden myth Adam represents mankind as a whole. Biblical scholars have made a great deal of this aspect, claiming that Israel was unique in seeing her history in the context of a total world view. Not only do they overstate their case but they also fail to see this world view for what it is – a simple introductory declaration. Consequently, they make the serious mistake of interpreting the whole myth along these lines. Properly understood, the purpose of this introductory ‘world view’ is simply to make it clear to the reader that the relationship of Yahweh to his people is not a private affair but something of universal importance, albeit as yet unexplained.<sup>645</sup> This point having been made, the story of the Garden of Eden continues *not as the story of mankind but as the story of Israel*, for while it makes perfect sense to see Israel as being marginalized from the garden situation<sup>646</sup> and forced to make her living from the unrewarding Palestinian hill country, it makes no sense at all to see the Mesopotamians and Egyptians in this light. So while it is clearly Adam and Eve, in the sense of *all humanity*, who become ideologically conscious and aware of their mortality, it is clearly Adam and Eve in the sense of *Israel alone* who are marginalized by the god of the marginals for their own good.

This change in perspective within the Garden of Eden myth opens the door to seeing the expulsion of Cain from the arable land in terms of Israel’s embarrassment *at the appearance of marginals within her midst*.<sup>647</sup> In this light the manner of Cain’s expulsion from the arable land represents a quite unique awareness: A group of erstwhile marginals, fully conscious of the contempt and hatred that had in former times been heaped upon themselves, portray their marginal god as taking a stance for a contemptible and hated marginal in their own midst. And this is not all, for this same awareness also implies Israel’s recognition that Yahweh’s defining relationship with the alienated marginal was not just significant for the marginal him or herself but also for themselves as former marginals. In other words they show their consciousness of the benefit they reaped in having a *contesting god*<sup>648</sup> – a god who was prepared to put

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<sup>645</sup> It is indeed my criticism of Sanders that he leaves this feature out. See above p. 4.

<sup>646</sup> In the Exodus texts signified as the fleshpots.

<sup>647</sup> See the possible connection between Cain and the biblical Kenites, a tribal people who were fanatical worshippers of Yahweh but who never settled and so maintained a separate nomadic existence as over against Israel.

<sup>648</sup> Or a God of wrath: ‘... the change in status - from a community dealt with by the sovereign's concern for his own property ("holiness") to one dealt with by force and hostility - accounts for the great emphasis upon the wrath and "vengeance" of God in the Old Testament. The unbelievably vicious distortion of this in the history of religion and theology alike can hardly be overstated. Actually, nothing better illustrates the radical breakthrough that the early biblical tradition represents, for it demonstrates as clearly as anything may the fact that Yahweh was not merely a symbol of tribal group interests. Furthermore, it illustrates an extraordinarily rare capacity for self-criticism (a capacity that becomes rarer under the impact of attitudes strongly promulgated as absolute truth by certain types of social scientists). The proclamation of the wrath of God is a very clear illustration of the ability on the part of ancient man to recognise a point of reference for individual and social behaviour above and beyond the existing social interests and patterns of action and conviction.’ Mendenhall, *Tenth*, p. 15-16.

himself *against them* because he *continued* to define himself as the god of the marginals long after they themselves had ceased from being marginals themselves.

#### *The scandal of the god-of-the-marginals idea*

One final point. It is important to be aware of the *scandalous* nature of this god-of-the-marginals notion. You hear a good deal in the work of biblical scholarship about Yahweh as the protector of the widow and orphan but very little about him as the champion of the unwashed and unloved marginal. However, the fact is that Yahweh's championing of the widow and orphan is not a characteristic that distinguishes him from other deities in the Ancient Near East. *Any* self respecting centrarchal god was supposed to look after the interests of those in the community who were unable to do this for themselves. What distinguished Yahweh from the other deities was his championing of the marginals – often depicted as foreigners – and such an attitude is no more acceptable to civilisation today than it was to civilisation then.

The story of Cain ends with a few verses concerning his descendants – Enoch through to Tubal-Cain – and with one further verse (4.25) dealing with the arrival of Cain's half-brother Seth. These additions deal with a problem that the story is supposed to generate: How can Israel inherit from one who has committed fratricide? Since I can find nothing remotely connected with the marginal ideology in any of these verses and since I believe the genealogies were the product of later editors I feel no obligation to deal with these texts here.

#### *The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men (Gen 6:1-4)*

It is easy to view this story as an 'erratic': an unaccountable block of pristine mythological material whose presence in the Yahwist's work cannot properly be explained but which demonstrates something of the mythological quarry from which he carved his stories.<sup>649</sup> Like others I was tempted to omit it from the discussion as a curious intrusion, until its significance in the Yahwist's overall exposition began to dawn on me.

#### *The advent of Category 1 ideological sin*

As van Seters points out, the text of Gen 6.1-4 should not be taken in isolation but should be seen as 'an introduction and interpretative prologue to' the Great Flood myth.<sup>650</sup> Verse 5, which is the formal introduction to the Yahwist's account of the flood, makes it clear that the incident was designed to establish the general state of affairs which provoked Yahweh into taking the quite extraordinary decision to destroy his

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<sup>649</sup> Otzen comments that the piece 'is commonly regarded as one of the most mythological texts in the OT.' Otzen, *Myths*, p. 58

<sup>650</sup> 'One cannot reconstruct a single myth behind Gen.6:1-4. There was a notion that in the early history of humankind gods mated with mortal women at will to produce heroes. The age was a violent one with great deeds of war, resulting in the heroes' destruction. There was also a separate tradition about a great disaster on humankind in general, reflecting a divine judgement.' John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: the Yahwist as historian in Genesis*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) p.157.

creation. Since the latter involved the death of all of mankind, and since in our reading of these myths death is a punishment *systematically* reserved for Category One ideological crimes of hubris and contempt, it is clear that the purpose of this incident is to make the point that it was not long before all of mankind was found to be guilty of committing Category One ideological sin.

Otzen attempts to interpret the incident of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Men along these lines, rather weakly if the truth be told, since for him this is the *third* occasion on which he finds the Yahwist addressing the subject of what I call Category One sin:

this fragment runs parallel to the narrative of the fall. The theme is yet again Promethian: man heedlessly arrogates to himself something of the nature of the gods and is punished for it ...<sup>651</sup>

Van Seters completely disagrees. He claims you cannot properly extract the notion of *any* kind of sin from this text:

There is no implication in the wording of v.2 that the activity of the divinities was particularly promiscuous or that anyone had violated the divine order or command. It is easy to read into these verses too much from other contexts or traditions.<sup>652</sup>

He makes this mistake because, though he recognises the strong sexual reference,<sup>653</sup> he has not understood the significance of the Yahwist's sex marker. As soon as you get the hang of the Yahwist's representative techniques it immediately becomes clear that *he has introduced this odd little sexual episode to signal his very first introduction of the idea of full-blooded Category One ideological sin.*

However, to appreciate his handiwork it is necessary to understand how *difficult* it was for the Yahwist to handle this notion of Category One ideological sin. You have to imagine him being quite clear about how he intended to deal with Yahweh's reaction to this phenomenon, having to hand just the mythological text he needed in the story of The Great Flood, but scratching his head a bit over how he would introduce the phenomenon of ideological sin itself, since it necessitated the inclusion within his text *of other gods and their perverting ideologies*. You have to understand that, on the face of it this was a pretty unthinkable thing to have to do since the other gods would naturally be seen as rivals that undermined Yahweh's undisputed sovereignty. Milton's solution of this same problem,<sup>654</sup> you will remember, was to introduce the idea of fallen angels. However, this was out of the question for the Yahwist who considered angels not as separate beings but simply as indications of God's presence. So he cleverly decided to introduce these deities with their perverting ideologies in the guise of 'sons', thereby making it clear that in relation to Yahweh they were subordinates and not rivals. Though he must have hated calling them sons of *God* he could not bring himself to call them sons of anyone else since that would have introduced the same problem. However, he refused to call them the sons of *Yahweh* since that would have indicated they were ideologically at one with him, which was the very opposite of his intention.

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<sup>651</sup> Otzen, *Myths*, p. 58.

<sup>652</sup> Van Seters, *Prologue*, p.149-50.

<sup>653</sup> 'The "sons of God" are attracted ... because they are beautiful and sexually desirable' Van Seters, *Prologue*, p.149.

<sup>654</sup> In *Paradise Lost*

With the sons of God identified as the source of centrarchal, ideological opposition to the god of the marginals, we now have to look for the significance of the daughters of men. We know from the prophets that it was common to use the representational figure of a virgin to refer to a human community.<sup>655</sup> In his famous allegory of Israel, as the female child found by Yahweh abandoned at birth, Ezekiel uses this figure, along with the Yahwist's sex marker, to establish Israel's ideological perversion. He describes her as a whore, a harlot and an adulterous wife who abandons her husband (Yahweh) and goes off with strangers (the gods of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon) even sacrificing her children to them.<sup>656</sup> If Israel is thus the *whore* of the mythical 'sons of God', doesn't that make these mythical 'daughters of men' their *wives* and therefore the very centrarchal societies from which Israel had been marginalized - Egypt and the societies in Mesopotamia? If this is the case, as I believe it is, then the problem is solved: the Yahwist's problem in determining how to introduce the subject of Category One ideological sin into his work and our problem in understanding what he was up to in introducing this, for us, weird interlude.

*Noah and the Flood (Gen 6:5-8:22)*

It is generally agreed that the Yahwist pinched the Great Flood story from the Mesopotamians (if not directly from the Gilgamesh Epic<sup>657</sup>) and it is equally clear now to us – though rarely if ever admitted by anyone else – that he did this to explain Yahweh's attitude towards Category One ideological sin. In this regard it is amazing how lightly commentators pass over Yahweh's decidedly extreme behaviour in destroying creation, especially when you compare it with his attitude towards the fratricidal Cain.<sup>658</sup> But, then, for people like von Rad this is the *fourth* occasion on which Yahweh has had to deal with what I describe as Category One sin, so I suppose he takes it that Yahweh has now had enough and on balance no longer believes his creation-exercise is worth the bother. This is a load of nonsense, of course, but since it is so widely accepted it will be as well if we sketch out the true pattern in the Yahwist's work so far:

- In the Adam and Eve story there is no sin of any description but only a dawning sense of ideological awareness which is rewarded by expulsion into the big wide world.
- In the Cain and Able story there is sin but only the non-ideological sort which brings about the marginalisation of the sinner and the warning that any action taken against him/her will constitute ideological sin for which the only punishment is death.
- In the Sons of God and the Daughters of Men story there is the first appearance of ideological sin itself on a universal scale.

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<sup>655</sup> Is. 47.1, Jer 46.11, 31.4

<sup>656</sup> Notice again in this text the prophet's difficulty because he cannot openly refer to these *strangers* as the gods of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon.

<sup>657</sup> *ANET*, pp. 93-95. See also the earlier Sumerian version pp. 42-44.

<sup>658</sup> See for example van Seters' bald statement that the flood, as a divine response, 'is dictated by the nature of the tradition itself.' Van Seters, *Prologus*, p. 190.

*Yahweh's volt farce*

So, I repeat, *the story of the Flood marks the first occasion on which God has come face to face with Category One ideological sin.* The subject of this myth is how he deals with it. The logic the myth follows – its general approach – is simple: since Category One ideological sin is an offence against creation and life itself, only death can be the appropriate punishment and, further, since Category One ideological sin is present everywhere, Yahweh can only react by ending everything. However, the interesting thing is that the myth ends paradoxically by concluding the exact opposite: that despite all logic Yahweh ‘pardons the unpardonable’ – at least in the sense of withholding the proper punishment.<sup>659</sup> But why?

*This is no act of grace*

Von Rad pretends to see in the myth's epilogue (8.21) Yahweh's desire to save humanity by an offer of grace.<sup>660</sup> But solving the problem in this way simply won't do, for Yahweh declares that Noah is righteous<sup>661</sup> which means he has no need of either salvation or grace. Furthermore, in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra<sup>662</sup> - a story built on very similar lines - the author portrays Yahweh as a deity who is by no means averse to removing the innocent along with the wicked *if the numbers are right*, which indicates that sparing the innocent is not the issue either. In fact, this comparison suggests that Yahweh's motives are rather different: that he refuses to do the right thing simply because he means to continue with his creation, and refusing to do the right thing is the *only* way of so continuing, given that Category One ideological sin is *everywhere* – or, as the Yahwist himself puts it, since ‘the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth’.<sup>663</sup>

From our standpoint this seems to present a rather unsatisfactory portrait of Yahweh but this is only because we expect the myth to provide us with a satisfactory one! Such, of course, was never the Yahwist's intention. It is important to see the two contradictory thrusts exposed by the Yahwist in the myth as corresponding to the two contradictory, yet firmly wedded, ideological realities facing the early Israelite community: 1) The need at all costs to maintain their ideological purity by keeping the life-giving god of the marginals constantly in their hearts and minds. 2) The triumphant pervasiveness of the opposing centrarchal ideology. You have only to read those passages, in the

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<sup>659</sup> There is of course no idea of pardon in the later prophetic sense of washing the sin away.

<sup>660</sup> ‘This saying of Yahweh without doubt designates a profound turning point in the Yahwistic primeval history, in so far as it expresses with surprising directness a will for salvation directed towards the whole of Noachite humanity, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from youth. In its hard paradox this v.21 is one of the most remarkable theological statements in the Old Testament: it shows the pointed and concentrated way in which the Yahwist can express himself at decisive points. The same condition which in the prologue is the basis for God's judgement in the epilogue reveals God's grace, and providence. The contrast between God's punishing anger and his supporting grace, which pervades the whole Bible, is here presented almost inappropriately, almost as an indulgence, an adjustment by God towards man's sinfulness.’ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.122-3

<sup>661</sup> Gen 7.1

<sup>662</sup> Gen 18.22-19.28

<sup>663</sup> Gen 8.21

Pentateuch and elsewhere, dealing with the practice of what biblical students call the 'ban'<sup>664</sup> to see how fearful Israel was that the second reality would undermine the first, and you only have to read what eventually happened to her, in spite of her best endeavours, to be persuaded how right she was.

*Affirmation of a fundamental contradiction*

What the Yahwist does in his myth is simply to affirm both realities in their contradictoriness and weddedness, with the suggestion that the whole thing can only be understood - if at all - in terms of an essential contradiction lying within creation. It is his clear-sighted description of the contradiction we all experience lying between the natural realm and the ideological realm. I describe it as the metacosmic train hitting the empirical buffers! You can, of course, avoid the contradiction in one of two ways. Either you can abandon the metacosmic train and become an atheist, but then you lose the only thing which for the Hebrews made life worth living: the god-of-the-marginals ideology. Or you can take religion and shut your eyes to the empirical buffers, but then you inevitably end up a prisoner of the centrarchal system: the 'natural' ruling order in the universe. Personally I prefer is to stick with the Yahwist and the contradiction.

*The Sons of Noah (Gen 9.20-28)*

Van Seters argues that the oldest form of this story, 'a very local Palestinian affair', was about Noah and his two sons Canaan and Eber - Canaan representing the local Egyptian vassal states and Eber the 'Hebrew' Israelites. He suggests that 'it was the Yahwist who took this rather limited local tradition and fitted it into his more universal perspective by making it the story of Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Jepheth'.<sup>665</sup>

The presence of the sex marker in the story clearly indicates that the Yahwist meant his readers to interpret the characters ideologically, Shem/Eber representing the people who served Yahweh as the god of the marginals and Ham/Canaan representing the centrarchal enemy. This reading is amply confirmed by the genealogy of Ham, where we find gathered together a long list of all the Egyptian-led centrarchal powers opposed to Israel.<sup>666</sup>

This time it is von Rad who dwells on the sexual reference in the text. According to him v.24, which reads 'Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him', may suggest that the Yahwist suppressed something even more repulsive than mere looking. However, when it comes to explaining the presence of this sexual reference in the text he, as usual, completely misses the point:

The Old Testament indicates in many places the amazement and abhorrence with which the newly arrived Israel encountered the sexual depravity of the Canaanites (cultic prostitution). In this they saw aetiologically the true reason for the defeat of Canaan before the invading Israelites (cf. especially Lev. 18.24ff.).<sup>667</sup>

<sup>664</sup> Ex 22.20; Deut 3.6, 7.1-2, 9.1-3, 12.2-3, 13.1-18, 17.2-7, 20.16-18; Josh 6.16-21, 7.1, 7.10-26, 8.22-29, 9.24, 10.20-40, 11.8-9, 11.10-14, 17.23; 1Sam 15.3-33.

<sup>665</sup> Van Seters, *Prologue*, p. 179.

<sup>666</sup> Gen 10.6-14

<sup>667</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.137

Of course von Rad was working with the old invasion hypothesis which gave credence to the notion that the Israelites were truly shocked by the Canaanites' sexual excesses. However, even he should have noticed the very odd way in which the Yahwist punctuated his text with these sexual references. Was it really so difficult to see that the Yahwist was using the topic of sex to represent the Israelites' ideological disgust in their confrontation with the Egyptian vassal states in Palestine?<sup>668</sup>

### *The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9)*

There are two immediately obvious things to note about this story: 1) That its locus is the Mesopotamian centrarchal system. The name Babel = Babylon; the location = towards the east; and the description of the building techniques = fired bricks held together with bitumen, clearly demonstrate that this is the case. 2) That its subject matter is *not* ideological sin since there is no sex marker.

Being ignorant of the Yahwist's sex marker technique von Rad is determined as usual to see these Babylonian building works as the expression of very serious (my Category One) sin,<sup>669</sup> even though he is forced to admit that there is no clear expression of sin *of any sort* in the actual text:

It appears indeed that the oldest version of the narrative represented the building of the tower precisely as a danger and threat to the gods. The Yahwist revision removed this feature. ... To be sure the consequences of this revision of the old material is now that the narrative does not make clear what man's sin actually was, and thus Yahweh's interference has a preventative character.<sup>670</sup>

What he does not explain is why the Yahwist removed such a reference if it was, as von Rad clearly believes, so crucial to his message of 'rebellion' and 'punishment'.<sup>671</sup> But, as the absence of the sex marker indicates, there is nothing of either Category One sin or punishment in the Yahwist's story. That said, von Rad comes very close to identifying the myth's true subject matter: the sheer power created by centrarchal society with its gathering and organizing of human potential. One can well imagine how impressive and threatening this power must have appeared to the Israelites (as indeed it still does to outsiders in our world of today). In the Flood myth the Yahwist had already dealt with the ideological threat posed by centrarchal society, suggesting that Israel was simply obliged to live with the constant danger of being undermined by the pervasive and victorious centrarchal ideology, since Yahweh, for practical reasons, had promised not to carry out the logical punishment against them. It is bad enough for proponents of the god-of-the-marginals ideology to be told that they have to live with the danger of ideological subversion but how is one to live if the opposing centrarchal ideology creates such power that it effectively ends up ruling the entire planet? It is this problem, concerning the naked power produced by centrarchal

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<sup>668</sup> See Ex 34.11-16, Judg 2.17.

<sup>669</sup> '...the saga views such a development of power as something against God, ...' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.151

<sup>670</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.151.

<sup>671</sup> '... (the saga) shows how men in their striving for fame, alliance, and political development set themselves against God. But a punishment befell them: ...' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.151



organisation, that the Tower of Babel story addresses. Its answer is to suggest that Yahweh has cunningly placed within centrarchical society what Marxists would call 'internal contradictions' which can be exploited so as to weaken it, on the David-and-Goliath principle that the bigger they are the harder they fall!

### *An Overview of the Genesis Myths*

Traditionally, the end of the Tower of Babel myth and the beginning of the Abraham story are together seen as a crucial turning point.<sup>672</sup> Von Rad suggests that the relationship between the myths and the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob stories is that the latter, as sacred history, answer the question that these myths, as primeval history, pose.<sup>673</sup> The basis of his argument is that the general form given by these myths is a growing avalanche of sin which Yahweh counters with gracious acts of mitigation right up until the final story.<sup>674</sup> However, our study has shown this set-up to be a fabrication.<sup>675</sup>

1. The stories neither display a crescendo in the numbers of people sinning nor an increasing seriousness in the category of sin depicted. Indeed, what I term Category One sin only fully appears in one story, the Flood myth and its subsidiary, Noah and his Sons, situated at the mid point of the series. (It is also touched upon, if only by prohibition, in the Cain myth.)
2. In *none* of the stories, not even in the Flood myth, does Yahweh display pardon or forbearance or mitigation of any kind.
3. It is not in the least surprising that the Tower of Babel myth ends without an act of mitigation since no sin of any sort has been identified and no punishment has been administered.

Claus Westermann offers an alternative understanding of this general form: 'a series of stories of crime and punishment to illustrate the various ways in which the creature can

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<sup>672</sup> 'We stand here therefore, at the point where primeval history and sacred history dovetail, and thus at one of the most important places in the entire Old Testament.' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.153.

<sup>673</sup> 'Primeval history had shown an increasing disturbance in the relationship between humanity and God and had culminated in God's judgement on the nations. The question about God's salvation for all nations remains open and unanswerable in *primeval* history. But our narrator *does* give an answer, namely at the point where sacred history begins. Here in the promise that is given concerning Abraham something is again said about God's saving will and indeed about a salvation extending far beyond the limits of the covenant people to "all the families of the earth"' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.154

<sup>674</sup> 'What is described therefore is a story of God with man, the story of continuously new punishment and at the same time gracious preservation .... This consoling preservation, that revelation of God's hidden gracious will, is missing, however, at one place, namely at the end of the primeval history. The story of the Tower of Babel concludes with God's judgement on mankind; there is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore seems to break off in shrill dissonance, ... Is God's relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God's gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever?'

<sup>675</sup> A conclusion also arrived at by Westermann: 'It is questionable, that, as so many modern interpreters think, J intends to present a crescendo of sin. In any case one should not speak of a "growth of sin to avalanche proportions" .... The text knows nothing of this'. *Genesis 1-11* (1984) p. 53. See also T. L. Thompson: '... the hypothesis of an extended Yahwistic document with its own theology about the increasing corruption of human nature, or some alternative form of salvation history, has little to support it.' *Origin* p. 79.

revolt against the creator'.<sup>676</sup> His construction is equally flawed since the motif which dominates Gen 1-11 is emphatically not that of 'crime and punishment'. It is, moreover, even less convincing than the 'crescendo of sin' hypothesis since it lacks inherent strength. Indeed his own listing of the crimes contained in the myths makes them out to be just about as finely constructed as the day's case list in a magistrates court!

- Direct disobedience to God.
- Enmity towards a brother that leads to murder.
- The arrogant overstepping of the limitations imposed by genealogy.
- General corruption
- Impiety towards one's parents.
- The arrogant abuse of technology

As regards this general form Philip Davies offers a further alternative (at least for the section Gen. 2.4b - 9.29) based on a structuralist analysis centred on the aspect of cursing.<sup>677</sup> There are five elements directly concerning cursing in the text:

1. The curse on Adam: Curse on the ground 'because of man'.<sup>678</sup>
2. The curse on Cain: Cain cursed from the ground.<sup>679</sup>
3. God's promise: Curse on the ground 'because of man' not to recur.<sup>680</sup>
4. Lamech's prediction: Noah's relief from work.<sup>681</sup>
5. Noah's curse: The cursing of Canaan.<sup>682</sup>

From these possibilities Davies selects 1. and 3. to form the 'armature' on which to hang all the stories: 'Man's behaviour elicits a curse which Yahweh accommodates with a blessing.'<sup>683</sup> However, a close inspection of this armature shows catastrophic weaknesses at both ends. Regarding the 'curse' there is an inherent confusion in the fact that there are two quite different curses on offer: Adam's and Cain's. This embarrassment is highlighted by the hard time Davies has in choosing between them. He eventually plumps for the Adamic curse but one has to wonder why the Yahwist needlessly created confusion by introducing *two* curses to choose from, supposing he did indeed intend to build his text on the curse-accommodation construct? Matters are made even worse by the tardy appearance of wickedness in the text. Unlike most scholars Davis is ready to admit that the idea is not yet present in the Eden story.<sup>684</sup> However, what he fails to see is that if there is a *need* for an accommodation it is because of wickedness and not because of a curse. In other words, curses that involve no wickedness, like the Adamic one, need no accommodation and so receive none - except for the somewhat humorous suggestion in Lamech's prediction that Noah's invention of wine will help to make the Palestinian peasants' lot more bearable!

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<sup>676</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 53, 369

<sup>677</sup> In his essay entitled: *Sons of Cain*, Davies *Word*, pp. 35-56.

<sup>678</sup> Gen 3.17

<sup>679</sup> Gen 4.11

<sup>680</sup> Gen 8.21

<sup>681</sup> Gen 5.29

<sup>682</sup> Gen 9.25

<sup>683</sup> 'The outcome of the exchange that follows the flood is an accommodation to the realities.' ... 'It is a relationship which God finally endorses by superimposing on his curse what amounts to a blessing.' Davies, *Word*, p.51-52

<sup>684</sup> 'I have tried to show that the Eden story does not introduce the theme of wickedness, ....' Davies, *Word*, p. 45.

Consequently, in correctly recognising that wickedness only appears late in the text (at 6.5, as the reason for the flood<sup>685</sup>) Davies further undermines his own curse-accommodation thesis.

The blessings end of Davies's structure is equally fragile, as one senses when reading his description of the flood story:

Even at the Flood, where God apparently seeks not to correct or counter but to annihilate, the outcome is good; the curse is countered, the seasonal cycle is ordered. In the Flood episode God's reaction is the last resort; yet he immediately ensures the survival of humanity, and at the end showers benefits upon it - so the pattern is repeated.<sup>686</sup>

In fact, of course, the Yahwist's story doesn't say that God countered the curse by ordering the seasonal cycle as Davies maintains. What the story says is that God promised never again to curse the ground, i.e. to destroy every living creature by interfering with the cyclical seasonal mechanism so that it rained and rained and never stopped. Consequently it is quite inappropriate to speak here, as Davies does, of a positive act of *any kind*, be it a blessing, a benefit, or an accommodation, since all God promises to do in future is *never again to personally interfere in order to deliver the proper chastisement when people commit Category One sins*.<sup>687</sup> When all is said and done it appears that this curse-accommodation structure - supposedly the product of the most sophisticated modern analytic technique - is really nothing more than a rehash of von Rad's avalanche thesis, as Davies tacitly admits when dealing with the flood story:

.... the story [of the sons of God and the daughters of men] .... functions as a kind of 'last straw' finally provoking God to bring the Deluge.<sup>688</sup>

As such, of course, it suffers from all the flaws we have discussed above.

It would seem that, far from constituting the armature on which the Yahwist hung his text, these numerous allusions to curses are simply details which have to be understood in the particular contexts of the stories in which they appear. In fact the most important curse - the destruction of life on earth - which occurs in the central flood myth, the axis around which all the other stories turn, is not even called a curse. Indeed, properly understood, each curse (there being no blessings or accommodations) has its own individual character determined by the story in which it occurs and it is the way in which these stories function together around the crucial flood myth which determines the overall form of the text:

- Ideological awakening and protection of the community from the corrupting influences of the garden situation - through marginalisation. (Garden of Eden)
- Marginalisation *within* the community as a result of non-ideological sin and the protection of the marginal from the community (Cain)
- The appearance of ideological sin in civilised, centrarchal society. (The sons of God and daughters of men) and the contradiction in that though it should be punished it isn't - for the sake of creation. (Flood)

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<sup>685</sup> Davies, *Word*, p.43.

<sup>686</sup> Davies, *Word*, p.45.

<sup>687</sup> Gen 8.21-22.

<sup>688</sup> Davies, *Word*, p.49.

- Identification of Israel's ideological opponents as the centrarchal societies. (Genealogy of Ham/Canaan)
- The power of unrestrained centrarchal society and the internal contradictions which Yahweh provides to disperse it. (Babel)

To return to von Rad, it is not just that his 'avalanching sin' scheme is flawed. His whole basic division of the texts into 'primeval history' and 'sacred history' is also fundamentally ill-conceived if he means us to see these as *historically* connected periods. Indeed I suspect that von Rad has fallen into 'the Otzen trap' of seeing these two sets of stories as the historically *before* and *after*, his basic logic being that since primeval creation ended in failure God went on to introduce something new. Rightly understood, all of the stories in Genesis 1-11 should be seen as myths and therefore as time-less. As such they are concerned not with *the historical situation pertaining before* Israel came into existence but with Israel's *actual existential situation seen from Yahweh's metacosmic standpoint*. To put the same thing in our modern language, these myths as aetiological stories offer an understanding of how things stood for Israel in the myth-maker's day and of how he thought the community ought to adjust to the situation, given its ideological commitment. In a nutshell, the stories are designed to set out Israel's existential scene as the community belonging to the god of the marginals.

To illustrate this point let us take the phenomenon of marginalisation and see how the Yahwist treats it in his text. Undeniably, marginalisation is an historical phenomenon: The people who became Israel had at some historical moment been marginalized from the centrarchal societies in the region, had become refugees and in learning from this experience had developed the god-of-the-marginals ideology. That is the basic outline of how things undoubtedly actually happened. However, when the Yahwist comes to write his Garden of Eden myth he completely reverses this historical process. He describes the Israelites, in the representative personalities of Adam and Eve, as being marginalized not from Egypt nor Mesopotamia but from Yahweh's own garden! In other words, the marginal community appears on the scene *before* the centrarchal societies from which she was marginalized - since they only put in an appearance in the sons of God and daughters of men episode! If the Yahwist decided to turn things around in this way it was presumably not because he was ignorant of how things had actually happened. It was because he was writing ideology, not history. Historically speaking, his story is a mess. Understood ideologically it is anything but. Had he described events as they had actually happened - by having the centrarchal societies appear first and by having Israel marginalized from them - he would have made it appear, ideologically speaking, that Yahweh was a *secondary* phenomenon, which would have defeated his whole purpose. Consequently he was *obliged* to have Adam and Eve expelled from Yahweh's own garden even if it meant admitting that Yahweh had been responsible for placing Adam and Eve in a potentially harmful situation - ideologically speaking - in the first place. Understandably, he does not labour this point!

## The Creation (*Gen 1.1-2.4a*)

Traditionally, the Creation myth has been taken to be a later work by the priestly writer from the Persian period<sup>689</sup> but, as we shall see, the dating of Old Testament texts has become highly controversial, making it unsafe to build on an hypothesis as to when they were written. However, it can safely be said that, as it stands, Genesis 1 functions as an introduction to the Yahwist's extended mythological treatise. That said, it clearly stands as a separate myth in its own right. Indeed, it is a polished piece of writing with great internal consistency and integrity and as such constitutes an example of the myth genre that is far superior to the Yahwist's work.<sup>690</sup> Its basic subject-matter is Yahweh's relationship to the universe as the metacosmic god, which is to say a *religious* rather than a *political* enquiry. However, there is one good reason for bringing it up here and that is to consider its standing on the political level. I have already shown that the Adapa myth is a centrarchical construct, conceiving of Man as the priestly mediator/administrator who runs creation as a business for his masters the gods, and I have shown how the Adam and Eve myth 'rectifies' this picture from the god-of-the-marginals standpoint by denying Man any status or privilege which separates him off from the rest of creation. In this light, how are we to understand these words taken from the Creation myth in Genesis 1?

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth."<sup>691</sup>

We have to be a bit careful because, as I have said, the status of man and his relationship to the creatures is not, at least *avowedly*, the subject matter of this creation myth. We have therefore to be conscious of the fact that we *may* be dealing with just an aside. However, I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that what we are faced with here is a bit of clear-cut, though heavily disguised, revisionism – an intentional process in which the reader's attention is cleverly moved away from the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' perspective and back to a safe civilisation-standpoint without anyone being the wiser. As I see it, the priestly writer achieves this feat by copiously glorifying the religious, metacosmic god, thus providing a smokescreen behind which he can quietly assassinate the disturbing political god of the marginals without the reader realising what he has been up to. It would seem, therefore, that what we have here is a highly successful<sup>692</sup> repeat-performance of what we already encountered in the heart-hardening aspect of the Exodus story.<sup>693</sup> There too, you will remember, we found the revisionist, priestly writer accentuating the metacosmic-god idea in order to create a smokescreen behind which he could jettison the god-of-the-marginals principle. The only difference is that whereas the Exodus heart-hardening and failure stories deal with

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<sup>689</sup> 'The form of this theological preface in the Priestly document is characteristically distinct from that of the Yahwist. Wherever the separation of the two strands by literary criticism is recognised at all there is absolute unanimity of opinion.' Von Rad *Genesis*, p.45.

<sup>690</sup> cf the unpolished 'piecemeal' nature of the Adam and Eve myth p. 177 above.

<sup>691</sup> Gen 1.27-28

<sup>692</sup> Since almost everyone seems to have been taken in!

<sup>693</sup> See p. 135 above.

Israel's central strategy these Genesis myths deal with the ideology lying behind it including an understanding of the nature and destiny (purpose?) of Man.

### *Summary*

#### *1. Strategic considerations in Exodus:*

*J's 'revolutionary' marginal strategy:* Israel as the servant of the god-of-the-marginals must concentrate on her demonstrating-and-exposing role, leaving Yahweh to do *his* job by protecting her.

*P's conservative and revisionist strategy:* Israel as a nation amongst nations is justified in defending her interests and fighting her corner, for Yahweh is on her side.<sup>694</sup>

#### *2. Ideological considerations in Genesis:*

*J's 'revolutionary' marginal ideology:* Yahweh is the god of the marginals and as such he is also, by inference, the metacosmic god: the god who has no needs.<sup>695</sup>

*P's conservative and revisionist ideology:* Yahweh is the metacosmic god standing alone (the god-of-the-marginals having been removed). As such he is a rather superior, transcendent high-god.

#### *3. The nature and destiny of mankind:*

*J's 'revolutionary' marginal understanding of the purpose of Mankind:* Mankind has no status and so no purpose to fulfil. Like all the other creatures His destiny is simply to find a way of satisfying His needs. In His case this means making creation fruitful.

*P's conservative and revisionist understanding of the purpose of Mankind:* As the conservative *Imago Dei* principle dictates, Mankind is destined *by his nature* to be the manager and boss of creation though not in order to supply Yahweh's needs since, even in P's work, Yahweh has no needs.<sup>696</sup>

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<sup>694</sup> This is what we have previously called 'the religious myth'. See pp. 141 and 144 above.

<sup>695</sup> See the Metacosmic Idea p. 77 above and pp. 230-238 below.

<sup>696</sup> This distinguishes P's conservative ideology from the normal centrarchal ideologies of the surrounding civilisations

## Chapter 10

### **The Evidence for the God of the Marginals Idea in the Patriarchal Stories**

#### *The Patriarchal Narratives as Ideological Stories*

If Genesis 2-11 is a mythical ‘treatise’ which aims to set out Israel’s worldview as the vision of a community ideologically wedded to the god of the marginals, the legendary narratives in Genesis 12-35 are a collection of aetiological stories which aim to describe the general ideological scene which this community faced in central Palestine in the Yahwist’s own day (whenever that was!). In other words, though these stories cannot, strictly speaking, be called myths – since they ostensibly recount events in historical times – there is still no hint of any interest in historical development and the text continues to operate essentially in an existential mode.<sup>697</sup> Such a conclusion may seem hard to swallow, given that the Yahwist opens his story cycle with what appears to be a clear cut historical plot:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”<sup>698</sup>

However, though this motif of Israel’s ‘journey to possession of a promised land’ regularly punctuates the text there is no evidence of any historical evolution even vaguely connected with it, either within the stories themselves or between one story and another. Indeed, were we to take the Yahwist’s stated plot seriously we would be forced to conclude that neither he nor his characters had the slightest idea of how they were to ‘get’ where they were supposed to ‘go’! In fact, of course, the Yahwist intends no historical development. He is simply using this overarching pseudo-historical plot to tie these narratives together, the stories themselves being designed to provide an Israelite community *already established in the land* with a panoramic view of its predicament, given its ideological (politico-ethical/spiritual/worldview) stance.

#### *The Stories’ Structure*

##### *Ideological geography as the first strand*

At first view the Yahwist’s basic structure looks deceptively simple. If we set aside the passages which are commonly considered as late additions<sup>699</sup> or the work of the priestly

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<sup>697</sup> Thus T.L. Thompson: ‘From the perspective of the *Toledoth* redaction, one does not move from a world of myth and legends into a world of history and folk tradition as one passes from the story of the Tower of Babel to the genealogy of Seth and the Abraham story under the *Toledoth* of Terah. Nor does one move from the genre of aetiology to the genre of historiography, though that is all too frequently done in the world of modern commentaries. Formally speaking, we have in the patriarchal stories nothing other than a massive expansion of narrative material within the aetiologically motivated *Toledoth* structure.’ *Origin* pp 79-81. In my own understanding the Yahwist only introduces a real historical dimension in the Exodus stories.

<sup>698</sup> Gen 12.1-2.

writer<sup>700</sup> the text appears to be made up, broadly speaking, of stories which deal with what might be described as Israel's 'ideological geography': her relationships with the neighbouring communities as a result of her peculiar ideological commitment. Thus we have:

- Stories about Israel's relationship with Egypt and her vassal Philistine states.<sup>701</sup>
- Stories about her relationship with the Ishmaelites.<sup>702</sup>
- Stories about her relationship with Moab and Ammon.<sup>703</sup>
- Stories about her relationship with Edom.<sup>704</sup>
- Stories about her relationship with the Canaanites.<sup>705</sup>

What is more, these narratives broadly follow the pattern established in the first cycle.

- The first story is about Israel's destiny to be a marginal community. It tells how Yahweh saves Abraham and Sarah by persuading Pharaoh to expel them from Egypt – Cp. the story of Yahweh's marginalization of Adam and Eve by expelling them from Eden.
- The second story, concerning Sarah's Egyptian maid Hagar, deals with the embarrassing problem of people within the god of the marginals' community who become marginalized – Cp. the Cain and Abel story which is about the same problem.
- The third story, of Sodom and Gomorrah, deals with Category One sin (sodomy, in terms of the sex-marker, indicating an extreme way of marginalizing other people) and the need to impose the death penalty for such a crime since it is flagrantly contrary to Yahweh's basic character – Cp. the flood story which deals with the same issue.<sup>706</sup>
- The fifth story, concerning the rape of Dinah, deals with the Canaanite problem: the ideological enemy found in the midst of the land – Cp. the story of the sons of Noah which is on the same subject.

The only narrative that does not fit into this very simple pattern is the one about Jacob and Esau. It does not seem to be parallel to the story of the tower of Babel in any obvious way.

#### *Covenantal promise as the second strand*

However, once we start looking more closely we find that this simple picture is seriously complicated by the fact that the Yahwist has woven into his text a second major theme, concerning Yahweh's covenant promise. Because of this we get what appears to be a whole new series of stories:

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<sup>699</sup> Gen 14.

<sup>700</sup> Gen 17; 23; 25.7-19; 27.46-28.9; 35.9-13 & 23-29.

<sup>701</sup> Gen 12.10-20; 20; 21.22-34; 26.

<sup>702</sup> Gen 16; 21.1-21.

<sup>703</sup> Gen 13; 18.16-33; 19.

<sup>704</sup> Gen 25.21-34; 27; 33.

<sup>705</sup> Gen 34..

<sup>706</sup> See pp. 191-193 above.



- Stories about the giving of the promise and predictions of future wealth, prosperity and possession of the land, generally couched in the form of covenant commitments.<sup>707</sup>
- Stories about Israel's faithfulness<sup>708</sup> (or lack of it) in living up to this covenant commitment, especially as regards procuring legitimate wives<sup>709</sup> and dealing with their barrenness.<sup>710</sup>
- Stories about the fulfilment of the promise in terms of miraculous escapes,<sup>711</sup> the advent of prosperity;<sup>712</sup> the finding and procuring of legitimate wives,<sup>713</sup> and the delivering of legitimate heirs.<sup>714</sup>
- Stories about the jealousy which the fulfilment of the promise engendered in other people<sup>715</sup> or surprisingly didn't.<sup>716</sup>

In fact, of course, this appearance is itself a simplification because though it is sometimes the case that these new promise stories are distinct from those in the first layer (e.g. The sacrifice of Isaac<sup>717</sup> and Jacob's wrestling with the angel<sup>718</sup>) in most cases what we find is the structures of 'promise' and 'ideological geography' inhabiting the *same* stories, which is ingenious but can be confusing.

#### *The corporate personality*

One further complication has also to be noted. These narratives are also structured using important representational techniques two of which we have already noted since they were used in the first series: *the sex-marker*, and *the corporate personality*. In these narratives the corporate personality in which communities are personified by human individuals is used rather more extensively so we shall begin by reviewing it. The most important thing to understand about this technique is that the all-important relationships between corporate personalities – the aspect the Yahwist himself is interested in – have everything to do with *ideology* and little if anything to do with *ethnicity*. It would be impossible to exclude ethnicity altogether, of course, since corporate personalities represent human *communities*. However, it should always be remembered that it is the ideological relationship which is being scrutinised, ethnicity being a secondary consideration only present because it cannot be excluded. The second thing to bear in mind is that the vertical father-to-son relationship between corporate personalities signifies *ideological identity* whereas the horizontal brother-to-brother or cousin-to-cousin relationship between corporate personalities signifies *ideological difference*. This means that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all seen in turn as

<sup>707</sup> Gen 12.1-3; 15; 22.15-18; 26.2-5; 28.10-22.

<sup>708</sup> Gen 22.

<sup>709</sup> Gen 24; 29-32; 30.1-8.

<sup>710</sup> Gen 15.1-3, 16, 18.9-15, 25.21.

<sup>711</sup> Gen 12.17-20; 35.1-5.

<sup>712</sup> Gen 21.22-34; Gen 26.12-33.

<sup>713</sup> Gen 24; 29-31.

<sup>714</sup> Gen 21.1-7; 25.21-26.

<sup>715</sup> Gen 26.12-16; 30.25-31.2.

<sup>716</sup> Gen 32.1-21 and 33.

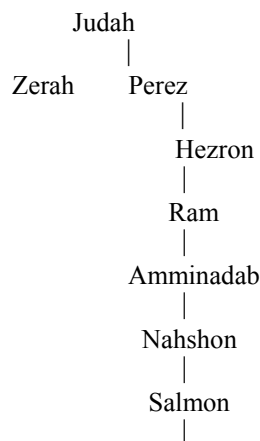
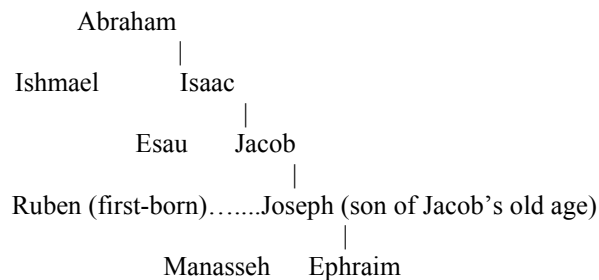
<sup>717</sup> Gen 22.1-14.

<sup>718</sup> Gen 32.24-32.

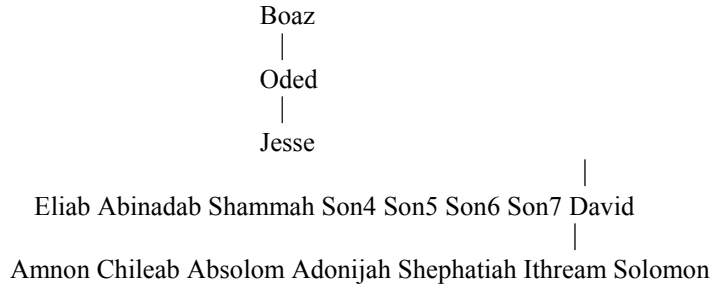
representing Israel in her character of the god of the marginals' community.<sup>719</sup> When it comes to brother or cousin relationships the exact extent of the ideological differences being represented is defined first by the familial distance of the relationships and then by taking other considerations into account, as for example the relative statuses of the mothers. Further to this, of course, the narratives themselves are specifically designed to describe the precise nature of the ideological differences by means of such contrivances as the sex-marker.

*Younger son inheritance*

You will notice that in these stories the Yahwist periodically restates Israel's special god-of-the-marginals ideological identity by employing another ingenious representational technique. In centrarchal society or what we ourselves call civilisation, the 'dynastic' principle is universally applied so that, normally, succession between generations takes place from father to *eldest* son. In fact, as I have previously pointed out, centrarchal society has no place for younger sons who, being possible rivals, are seen as destabilising influences to be got rid of (i.e. marginalized) wherever possible once inheritance has taken place. Quite naturally therefore, the younger son becomes the classic symbol for the marginal and the Yahwist employs it in each story to restate Israel's god-of-the-marginals ideological identity by studiously making the principle of succession between her representatives that of father to *younger* son. This technique was adopted by other writers in the tradition as can be seen below:



<sup>719</sup> Georges Roux in *Ancient Iraq*, (Middlesex: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Second edition, 1980) pp. 41-2. describes a very similar technique used in the construction of the Sumerian King List. Here the dynasties of important independent cities in Sumer were artificially welded together in sequence to form a fictive unit, thus creating a sense of ideological unity.



See also Saul's remark on being approached by Samuel who has it in mind to anoint him as Israel's first king:

'Am I not a Benjamite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way?'

Before embarking on his first story – in a brief introduction announcing the promise motif – the Yahwist makes a point of indicating the universal basis from which he is working, just as he had done in his previous myth cycle.<sup>720</sup> He does this by emphasising that Israel's relationship with the god of the marginals is not a private affair but a matter of global significance:

I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.<sup>721</sup>

### *The Wife Passed Off as the Sister*

It is noteworthy that in his grand tour of the region the Yahwist's first port of call is Egypt.<sup>722</sup> It may be true, as a number of historians have pointed out, that the biblical story of the conquest of the land and the settlement of the tribes shows no awareness of the fact that Egypt was the centrarchal power nominally in control of central Palestine in the pre-monarchical period.<sup>723</sup> However, here the Yahwist certainly does indicate such awareness. The story he uses to describe Israel's ideological relations with this civilisation power is that of the wife passed off as the sister. The story itself appears three times in Genesis: twice as an Abraham version<sup>724</sup> and once in the Isaac texts.<sup>725</sup> In the first version of the story Pharaoh is Abraham's opposite number. In the other two versions it is Abimelech, the Philistine King of Gerar. Von Rad tells us that the Abraham/Abimelech story is unanimously ascribed to the Elohist by those who believe there was an E source.<sup>726</sup> He also finds some indication that the oldest version is the Isaac variant,<sup>727</sup> though Van Seters disagrees.<sup>728</sup> It is not my place to enter into

<sup>720</sup> See p. 188 above.

<sup>721</sup> Gen 12.3.

<sup>722</sup> Gen.12.10

<sup>723</sup> See p. 95 n. 295 above.

<sup>724</sup> Gen 12.10-20, 20, (21. 22-34).

<sup>725</sup> Gen 26.

<sup>726</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 226

<sup>727</sup> 'Perhaps this version of the narrative really is the oldest of the three.' (Wellhausen, Noth) Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 271.

<sup>728</sup> 'In my earlier treatment of this chapter, I argued that no older traditions lay behind the Yahwist narrator and that he simply constructed a life of Isaac based upon similar episodes in the life of Abraham.'

such discussions; however I take it as a working hypothesis that the Yahwist knew of the story in *either* an Egyptian *or* a Philistine context and decided for his part to use it *in both contexts* in order to demonstrate his understanding that Egypt and Philistia represented *the same ideological problem* for the-god-of-the-marginals community.

Significantly, in both the Egyptian and Philistine versions the Yahwist does not introduce an appropriate representative personality in order to indicate the particular community he was dealing with. He simply places the story geographically in either Egypt or Philistia. Of course the reader is perfectly justified in seeing Pharaoh as representing the Egyptians – and Abimelech the Philistines – but the fact is that in the Yahwist's hands the representative personality-construct is used to describe an ideological *relationship* and in these stories, whatever way you look at them, no relationship of any sort exists.<sup>729</sup> This can only mean that as the Yahwist sees things there is no ideological affinity of any sort between Israel and these civilisation powers. Does this state of affairs indicate indifference? I think not, though I do detect a certain blindness, as if Israel finds herself at this historical moment situated for the most part beneath Egypt's and the Philistine's civilisation gaze. What the stories do suggest by means of their common sex marker is that a *natural incompatibility* exists between Israel and these civilisation powers. The Yahwist draws them as polar opposites, like people from different planets thrown together by fate,<sup>730</sup> a situation which only serves to exaggerate their diametrically opposing interests. In fact the Yahwist pictures Israel as doing her best to avoid all dealings with Egypt and Philistia ... the only trouble being that life sometimes makes this impossible. In short, the Yahwist tells us in no uncertain terms that for the god-of-the-marginals community these civilisation communities constitute *the ideological enemy*.

I have to confess that I am slightly uneasy about using the word 'enemy' to describe the Yahwist's attitude towards Egypt and Philistia for I am aware that, fundamentally, he viewed them not as powers to be vanquished – something he knew to be completely beyond Israel's capability – but rather communities which had to be shamed into changing their ways. However, it is clear to me that he wished to make a big distinction between Israel's relationship with these civilisation powers and her relationships with the 'brother' or 'cousin' communities of Edom, Moab, Ammon and the Ishmaelites. What is more, when he deals with the Canaanites – the civilisation people Israel found living alongside her in Canaan – there is no doubt about his ideological animosity; see below.

The Yahwist tells the story of the wife passed off as the sister in such a way as to make it obvious that he is referring to the whole Hebrew/marginal, Israel-in-Egypt experience as this is reported in the later Genesis and Exodus texts:<sup>731</sup> Abraham is forced into

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The ... episode of the threat to the patriarch's wife in vs. 1-11 is a rather tame version of the two stories in Gen. 12.10-20 and chapter 20 with elements drawn from each.' Van Seters, *Prologue* p.268.

<sup>729</sup> To find a relationship you have to go right back to the very beginning (in the previous series) where the Egyptians are sons of Ham and the Israelites the sons of Shem. In other words the only relationship recognised is that the Egyptians are human beings.

<sup>730</sup> Generally famine.

<sup>731</sup> In my opinion the Yahwist's texts now found in Genesis are better understood as coming after those now found in Exodus, but more of this later.

Egypt by famine<sup>732</sup> (cf. Gen 41.53-42.5, 43.1 - 2, 46.1 - 4); God smites Pharaoh and his house with plagues<sup>733</sup> (cf. Ex 7-12) so that Pharaoh eventually orders them to leave<sup>734</sup> (cf. Ex 12.29-36). In this story, therefore, we must see ideological Israel represented as a homeless and defenceless marginal driven against his will into an area of civilisation. Aware of his fraught situation, he timidly persuades his young and desirable wife to pass herself off as his sister, in case some powerful centrarch murders him in order to lay hands on her. His fears are justified, for as soon as Pharaoh learns of the arrival of this beautiful girl in his territory he promptly has her removed to his harem. Ironically the marginal's physical situation then improves; as the brother of this exceptionally beautiful woman he is privileged. But Yahweh now suddenly takes action to protect his promise by sending plagues on Pharaoh's house. When the king discovers the reason for his sudden misfortune he chides the timid marginal for misleading him and tells him to take his wife and leave at once. So the day is saved and the marginal is mercifully remarginalised because of Yahweh's doing!

Given – to our own way of thinking – the rather unfortunate patriarchal perspective of the writer we have to see the young and beautiful wife in the story as representing Abraham's most prized possession, next, that is, to life itself. This being the case, Abraham's behaviour in asking Sarah to risk divorce from him is certainly tragic but by no means reprehensible. After all, passing her off as his sister does not put Sarah more at risk than she already is and if she does indeed fall prey to some centrarch's lust will she be any worse off, as a slave in his harem, with a live husband than with a dead one? We can easily imagine that this was just the sort of brutal dilemma faced by marginals in those days, so who are we, comfortable civilisation men and women, to find fault with Abraham's tactics? However, the presence of the sex-marker means that we are not free to withhold judgement in this way. It obliges us to attribute ideological blame to Abraham, as Pharaoh's reaction in scolding him demonstrates.<sup>735</sup> This point is reinforced by the fact that the reader is well aware that Sarah does not in fact constitute *merely* Abraham's second most important possession, since as the mother of Abraham's future progeny she also represents Yahweh's promise. In other words Abraham is not just any old marginal. He is the god of the marginals' covenant-partner. Viewed in this light the story's point is that, given Israel's marginal status, she is manifestly not in any position to defend herself physically against ideological enemies. It is understandable, therefore, that she should be tempted to indulge in dubious ruses in order to survive. However, given her covenant commitment such behaviour is no longer ideologically defensible. For according to the terms of the covenant Israel is obliged to display confidence in Yahweh,<sup>736</sup> *believing that he will act in her defence in some sovereign manner which she cannot possibly predict or calculate in advance.*<sup>737</sup> If she

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<sup>732</sup> Gen 13.10

<sup>733</sup> Gen 12.17

<sup>734</sup> Gen 12.19-20

<sup>735</sup> 'What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her for my wife?' Gen 12.18-19.

<sup>736</sup> See above p. 47 note 146.

<sup>737</sup> Though von Rad sees this critical aspect of the story he deliberately downgrades it: '... the bearer of promise [is] himself the greatest enemy of the promise; for its greatest threat comes from him. But though the narrative provokes these or similar reflections, they remain relatively secondary in the presence of Yahweh's activity. ... If Yahweh did not go astray in his work of sacred history because of

allows herself to become involved in defensive strategies she will inevitably end up behaving no differently from the way in which civilisation does. She will find that she has effectively abandoned her true destiny which is to behave differently, thereby shaming civilisation into changing its ways. Clearly this story (with its alternative Philistine versions) constitutes the Yahwist's announcement of the first of the two great pillars of ideological Yahwism. *In the covenant Israel agrees to place all matters concerning her defence in Yahweh's hands.*<sup>738</sup> Consequently she is obliged to accept her marginal status, seeing it as something that Yahweh has ordained for her, having in mind a world-wide project for rescuing civilisation from itself.

### *The Expulsion of the First Born*

The Yahwist now turns, as he did in the first cycle,<sup>739</sup> to the theme of the local losers whom Israel, in her new situation as the occupier of the land (or at least one of them) embarrassingly has to define over and against herself. He expounds his understanding of their situation in the story of Isaac and Ishmael.<sup>740</sup> In fact he gets himself into a spot of bother when running the 'promise' and 'human geography' motifs in series within the same narrative. He uses the beginning of the tale in connection with the promise motif and the end of it with the human geography motif. The only trouble, as we shall see, is that at the point where they meet in the middle of the story the motives interfere with one another and create a nonsense. Because of this the Yahwist is obliged to insert an artificial buffer to keep them apart, which rather ruins the piece as a bit of story-telling – though not as an ideological argument which, after all, is the only thing he is interested in.

As I say, it is the promise-motif which makes use of the first half of the story. In the narrative's symbolic terms the covenantal promise that Yahweh will take care of Israel's defence is represented by the assurance of a legitimate heir. This being the case, what can the barrenness of the legitimate wife Sarah, with which the tale starts, represent? Since the legitimate heir represents Yahweh's fulfilment of his promise Sarah's barrenness must represent Yahweh's apparent failure to fulfil his promise, which can only mean his apparent failure to carry out his engagement to defend the community when it is attacked. This, of course, is a major theme within these texts and reappears regularly.<sup>741</sup> The Yahwist uses this recurring theme to highlight Israel's difficulty in living up to her covenant commitment. Using the barrenness symbolism he alludes to the historical dilemma the community faced when it was assailed by forces stronger than itself and so quite naturally attempted to deal with the situation by employing defensive stratagems. His lesson is that in doing so Israel demonstrated her lack of faith in the god of the marginals.<sup>742</sup> In the story the stratagem used to deal with

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the failure and guilt of the recipient of promise, then his word was really to be believed.' *Genesis*, pp. 169-70.

<sup>738</sup> The second pillar is constituted by Israel's parallel responsibility which we shall come to later.

<sup>739</sup> In the Cain and Able story. See above p. 184.

<sup>740</sup> Gen 15, 16, 21.1-21.

<sup>741</sup> Gen 25.21, 30 1-21.

<sup>742</sup> e.g. Hosea 7.11. 'Israel is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria.' See also the contrasting image in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) where Israel is seen as

the problem of barrenness is the substitute womb. Sarah offers her slave girl to Abraham who makes no objection. The presence here of the sex marker shows that however much we may sympathise with the couple and seek to excuse their actions the story simply doesn't permit it. The story is a masterful contrivance in the way in which it enables the reader to share the excruciating dilemma Israel faced whenever, historically, things turned out badly and Yahweh failed to come promptly to her rescue.<sup>743</sup>

In the second half of the narrative the business of the covenantal promise fades from view, to be replaced by the human-geography, inter-communal relations motif. The theme, as in the Cain and Able story, is the marginal who embarrassingly appears in the god-of-the-marginals Community, and the subject is, of course, the Ishmaelite vagrants who continually infiltrated into Israel's territory, causing havoc and thereby inciting rejection. In the story the embarrassing marginal is represented by Hagar, Sarah's *Egyptian* slave – delicious reversal of fortunes if we place the story after Exodus – and by her 'illegitimate' son Ishmael. The operating sex marker is of course the same one as in the first half of the story, only here it is viewed from a different angle – from Hagar's point of view rather than from that of Sarah and Abraham. As such it does not indicate ideological lack of confidence so much as ideological incompetence. The story makes the point that the Ishmaelites, while undoubtedly natural marginals (true sons of Abraham) having precedence, as such, even over the Israelites themselves (they are Abraham's *first* born) none-the-less betray an ideological 'illegitimacy' in their wildness and unruly behaviour. So in spite of their positive features the Ishmaelites remind Israel that *for the job Yahweh has given her, having a marginal perspective is not enough; it is necessary also to be disciplined and organised*, characteristics the Ishmaelites conspicuously lacked.<sup>744</sup>

So, you see, if you read each half of the story of the expulsion of the first-born independently they both make good sense and deliver powerful ideological lessons. Problems only occur when you try to read them together. Doing this leads you to conclude, quite wrongly, that the Yahwist believed that the condition of the Ishmaelites as marginals was somehow Israel's fault. The Yahwist makes strenuous efforts to block such a reading by making out that Abraham did not in fact really go along with Sarah's stratagem and was only persuaded to do so when God carefully explained to him that in this particular instance he should overrule his scruples and let Sarah have her way. The result, on the story level, is a complete mess since there is little point, artistically, in creating a scenario of quite outrageous selfishness and cruelty, only then to attempt to nullify the effect by introducing a pitifully inadequate and artificial excuse. That said, once you understand what the Yahwist is up to there is no doubting the success of his work ... strictly on the ideological level, of course.

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demonstrating faith in her covenant commitment by being prepared to sacrifice that which is even more precious than life itself.

<sup>743</sup> I can't help thinking of Auschwitz

<sup>744</sup> C.f. Moses' adventurism, p. 127 above.

### *The Lure of the Garden*

In his third story,<sup>745</sup> as in his first cycle (in the story of The Flood<sup>746</sup>) the Yahwist deals with the problem of Category One sin, which is to say behaviour which flouts Yahweh's basic character as god of the marginals. Here, Lot and his daughters act as representatives of Moab and Ammon: communities culturally and ethnically closely linked with Israel. As in the story of the flood the narrative is an extended drama. It begins with Abraham's separation from Lot and the latter's fatal choice to settle in the 'well watered valley of the Jordan' and the fictitious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this opening section we find the Yahwist returning to his Eden theme in which the garden represents the easy conditions associated with ideological perversion and Egyptian (and Mesopotamian) civilisation. This means that in choosing to make his home in the garden environment Lot is represented as making a terrible, if understandable, ideological mistake.

Given this situation it comes as no surprise to discover that as soon as Lot arrives in his chosen home he is beset by ideological sin, flagged up by the usual sex-marker. Two angels sent by God to investigate reports of 'the very grave sin' of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah have been invited by Lot to stay at his house for the night, when suddenly the entire male population of the city arrive, clamouring to use the visitors as sex objects. The story's concluding episode also involves a sex-marker: Lot and his family have been forced to flee to the hills to avoid the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah where the lack of available husbands causes his daughters, in desperation, to resort to incest with their father in order to provide him with offspring. The Yahwist's point would seem to be that the problem with the communities of Moab and Ammon was that they had established themselves in geographic areas of Palestine where the centrarchal ideology had remained unusually strong. Though they could not be held responsible for this situation it meant that they had eventually succumbed and taken on board something of this pernicious, centrarchal ideology. The shocking character of both of these sex markers would seem to indicate the Yahwist's strength of feeling against the embedded centrarchal influences that the new communities which arose in central Palestine all encountered. This is reflected in his strength of feeling against the Canaanites, who represented the very same danger for Israel herself; see below. That said it has to be noted that the Yahwist absolves the Moabites and Ammonites of having centrarchal leanings for there is no indication in the story that either Lot or his daughters actively sought for or enjoyed the incestuous act. Indeed, the story precludes such a reading for it tells how the daughters make Lot drunk so that the proceedings take place without his knowledge or consent. Clearly, as the Yahwist sees things the Moabites and Ammonites are not like the Philistines – willing ideological vassals of Egypt. Indeed it could be argued that he found Israel's behaviour no more justifiable than that of Moab or Ammon. For Sarah is just as guilty as Lot's daughters in being prepared to go to extreme lengths to ensure the advent of progeny. Whereas Lot's daughters themselves have sexual intercourse with their father Sarah persuades her husband to have sex with her slave girl. Both acts constitute a lack of confidence in life. The fact that Sarah's solution of the problem was, strictly speaking, legal, whereas the

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<sup>745</sup> Gen 13, 18.16-33, 19.

<sup>746</sup> See p. 191-193 above.



other's wasn't, is of little consequence since the nature of both acts was accidental, being dictated by circumstances. In fact, the difference between these acts comes down to a matter of geography and Lot's unhappy choice. The Yahwist's purpose was apparently to warn his fellow Israelites that they should be wary of Moab and Ammon. This was not because he believed they had sold out but because their isolation and fortuitous contacts with the pernicious and subverting beliefs and practices of centrarchal society had rendered them ideologically suspect.

The thrust of the first part of the *Lure of the Garden* story is interesting since it seems to contradict the findings of the story of the flood – its parallel in the myth series. In the flood narrative, you will remember, Yahweh promised to hold back from executing Category One sinners because this constituted the only way in which creation could continue, given the fact that virtually everyone was guilty of the crime. In this present story Yahweh tells Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their ideological wickedness. Abraham is appalled by this willingness to execute innocent people along with the guilty. He bargains with God, eventually getting him to agree to abort his plan if there are ten righteous souls within the cities. However, apparently not even this limited number can be found when the count is taken, for the next thing we hear is that God has carried out his threat. Since the Yahwist has told us that God, in the previous story, promised Noah *not* to carry out his obligation to execute Category One sinners by destroying the world one naturally wonders why he should feel justified, in the current story, in obliterating Sodom and Gomorrah. As I see it, what we find here is the Yahwist's determination to give room in his work to two conflicting realities. On the one hand he is aware that life does not make things easy for marginal communities by causing the centrarchal powers which persecute them to self-destruct. On the other hand he is aware that on specific occasions centrarchal powers do apparently come to grief because of their contradictions. If, therefore, this story in the second series tends to contradict the findings of the parallel story in the first, it seems to me that it is because the Yahwist encountered such a contradiction in life and his concern was to be true to life rather than to be strictly logical.

### *Twin Brothers*

In the Abraham and Lot story the Yahwist dealt with Israel's 'cousin' communities of Moab and Ammon. In the story of Jacob and Esau<sup>747</sup> he deals with Israel's much closer, 'twin brother' community of Edom, which to all intents and purposes was indistinguishable from Israel culturally, ethnically and geographically. The feature which most distinguishes this story from all the others is that it contains no sex marker.<sup>748</sup> This can only mean one thing: that the Yahwist saw nothing ideologically suspect about the Edomites. Indeed, though the relationship between the brothers is

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<sup>747</sup> Gen 25.21-34, 27.1-45.

<sup>748</sup> The casual remark in Gen 26.34-35 that Esau married a couple of Hittite women who made trouble for his mother and father is recognised as being an insertion by the Priestly writer who, as we shall see later, had his own particular axe to grind: 'The Priestly notion about Esau's marriage certainly has nothing to do with those ancient Isaac traditions. ... Behind those brief statements lies a completely different conception of the Jacob-Esau story and especially of the reason for Jacob's departure from his parent's house. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 273.

described as one of rivalry, at least on Israel's part, at no point is Esau pictured as doing anything to merit serious condemnation. The only apparent criticism made of him is that he 'despised his birthright',<sup>749</sup> a curious remark, given the story's subversion of the dynastic principle.<sup>750</sup> In fact, as we shall see, there are good reasons to believe that this comment is an unbecoming interpolation. The fact is that in the 'twin brothers' story Esau is described as generous and forgiving, a remarkable fact given the way in which the Edomites were perceived by exilic and post-exilic writers. On the other hand Jacob is presented as an ambitious cheat and liar. In the symbolic terms of the story the thrust is that in Edom the Yahwist sees the tragedy of a community which is robbed of a special relationship with the god of the marginals simply by the fact of its being distinct. In the terms of the story the fact of there being two brothers *of itself* means that only one can inherit the promise represented by Isaac's blessing. By the mere fact of being the eldest therefore, Esau is dispossessed. The Yahwist admits to having no satisfactory resolution for this terrible predicament. All he can say to Edom is that one day, sometime in the distant future, it will break free out of this terrible destiny:

Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,  
and away from the dew of heaven on high.  
By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother;  
but when you break loose you shall break his yoke from your neck.<sup>751</sup>

Undeniably what we see here is the Yahwist's bad conscience about the well-known negative effects of the doctrine of election.

### *The Rape of Dinah*

*A word or two about 'source criticism'*

For many reasons, literary as well as ideological, this<sup>752</sup> is a particularly difficult text to analyse, which means that it is going to be necessary to clarify our attitude to source criticism if we are to deal with it adequately. Towards the end of the nineteenth century J. Wellhausen, working with others, produced a documentary hypothesis in which he argued that the first six books of the Bible are the result of the editing together of four different written sources which he judged to be of widely different ages - J: 9<sup>th</sup> century, E: 8<sup>th</sup> century, D: 7<sup>th</sup> century and P: 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century. Although this hypothesis became firmly established during the first half of the twentieth century it has recently come under increasing criticism, first because of the early dates attributed to these sources and second because it is increasingly believed that the so-called J source contains features ('ideological' features, using this word in a non-political sense) which show that it is not a unity but rather the product of numerous people making contributions over a certain length of time. So far in this work I have recognised the existence of two of these sources, J and P. However it has to be said that my own approach is based on *ideological colour*, whether 'revolutionary' or revisionist, rather than on *linguistic* or *cultural* criteria. Consequently, in-so-far as I have recognised J and P it has only been because I have been able to detect a significant political difference between them. In

<sup>749</sup> 'Thus Esau despised his birthright.' Gen 25.34. The fact that he is said to be weaker than his brother (Gen 25.23) can hardly be construed as criticism.

<sup>750</sup> For reasons which we have already explained: See pp. 204-205 above.

<sup>751</sup> Gen 27.39-40.

<sup>752</sup> Gen 34

saying this I do not wish it to be inferred that I find source-criticism misconceived. If I make no reference, for example, to the Elohist it is not because I reject source-criticism's E. It is simply because up to now I have been unable to detect any clear ideological difference between J and E and so naturally treat them as one. Since the whole business of the documentary hypothesis is once again in dispute I try to restrict my comments, as far as possible, to that of which I personally can be sure. As I am neither a linguist nor a historian I can speak with no authority on the existence or otherwise of linguistically identifiable strands within the text, or cultural difference which indicate multiple authorship. However, ideology I do know about if only as a result of my struggles to be involved in solidarity with those at the bottom of society, and my ideological analysis of these texts demonstrates, I would say irrefutably, that some are 'revolutionary' and others revisionist. Consequently, where source criticism has traditionally identified a text as belonging to either J or E, and I myself have identified it as being ideologically 'revolutionary',<sup>753</sup> I have attributed it without hesitation to 'my' Yahwist. Likewise, where source criticism has identified a text as belonging to P, and I myself have identified it as being ideologically revisionist, I have attributed it without a second thought to the priestly writer. However, it should be clearly understood that I can only vouch for my ideological contribution. In other words it may well be the case that my Yahwist is not an individual but rather a tradition of 'revolutionary' writers, the same thing applying to P as far as revisionism is concerned.

*Can we attribute this story to J?*

Back now to our story. Source criticism encountered difficulties when dealing with this text, for though it contains a number of inconsistencies and duplications – characteristic signs of a composite structure – these do not clearly indicate the presence of identifiable underlying sources. Added to this, the text seemed to contain a number of peculiarities. For example, the expression 'he had wrought folly in Israel' in Gen 34. 7, which presupposes Israel's existence as a 'nation', appeared inappropriate in what was taken to be a story about how this community came to exist.<sup>754</sup> This consideration had added weight at the time since many scholars still believed in the historicity of the patriarchal age.<sup>755</sup> Then again, unlike all the other Jacob narratives this story is unique in being about a *daughter*, a fact which led Von Rad to declare that 'apparently the main body of Jacob traditions knew nothing of a daughter along with the twelve sons.'<sup>756</sup> Finally, the story was also said to stand out from the rest of the Yahwist's narratives in lacking aetiological references. Thus Von Rad:

Our narrative, in contrast to the majority of patriarchal stories, is not an aetiological saga at all. Its concern is not to explain a custom or a name but to announce an event.'<sup>757</sup>

<sup>753</sup> As usual the word is in inverted commas to indicate a marginal as opposed to a class revolution.

<sup>754</sup> 'The expression, "he had wrought folly in Israel", ... presupposes Israelite settlement in Canaan, and the existence of a national standard of behaviour, a point of view quite incompatible with that of the J-E narratives.' S.H. Hooke in *Peck's Commentary on the Bible*, Eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. 1962) p. 200.

<sup>755</sup> An ideological understanding of these texts *assumes* that they are post-'revolution' assessments of Israel's situation, which means that the question of a patriarchal age is not pertinent.

<sup>756</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*. p. 330.

<sup>757</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*. P. 334.

All of these circumstances led many scholars in the last century to conclude that the story of Dinah's rape should not be attributed to the Yahwist but rather to a later writer,<sup>758</sup> though it has to be said that Von Rad was not of their number.

*The story's position and content strongly indicate J's hand*

In the fourth story of his myth cycle – The Sons of Noah – the Yahwist dealt with the problem of Israel's ideological enemy: the civilisation communities of Egypt, Philistia and the Canaanites. In this, the concluding story of his patriarchal cycle,<sup>759</sup> he deals basically with the same question in its most immediate form: What is Israel's relationship with the centrarchal ideology on her doorstep, with the people she called the Canaanites? Already in this second story-cycle we have had (in Genesis 24) allusions to the Canaanites, in which Abraham is described as going to considerable lengths to avoid the possibility of his son marrying one of their number. We have also had a comprehensive discussion of the ideological insidiousness of the latter as regards the situation in Israel's cousin-communities of Moab and Ammon – though, of course, in this context they appeared not as Canaanites but as inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Given this situation it seems to me inconceivable that the Yahwist would have finished his geo-ideological tour of the region without taking the Israelite-Canaanite relationship *directly* into consideration for, whatever way you look at it, Israel's attitude towards these people, however labelled, was clearly a key consideration. To put it another way, an even half adequate description of Israel's ideological predicament in ancient Palestine necessitated a story dealing with the Canaanite ideological adversaries residing in her midst; for without it the whole pattern which the Yahwist has so carefully established would be critically wanting.

But what about Von Rad's argument that the story stands out from the others in lacking aetiological references? The above pattern demonstrates that far from being idiosyncratic, the story in its form clearly follows the pattern set by all of the other narratives. Like them it describes Israel's ideological relationship with one of her neighbours. So the fact that this particular story is not obviously an 'aetiological saga' as Von Dar defines this terms (vis: a story that explains a custom or a name) does not mean that it should be understood as quasi historical (vis: a story 'announcing an event'). Like all the stories in this second series this one is clearly essentially existential,<sup>760</sup> dealing as it does with *the nature of a present ideological relationship* rather than with *the religious import of some past event*. Indeed it seem to me misguided to consider *any* of the Yahwist's stories as a foundation narrative of the likes of the story of Romulus and Remus.

*Ideological analysis shows the story to be irrefutably 'revolutionary'*

Bearing all of this in mind what does an ideological analysis reveal about the narrative? What understanding of Israel's position vis-à-vis the Canaanites does the Yahwist communicate by means of this story? In his choice of Shechem's rape of Dinah as a sex marker he clearly shows that he sees the relationship as one of outright ideological

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<sup>758</sup> e.g. S.H. Hooke see *Peak's* p. 200.

<sup>759</sup> Gen 34.

<sup>760</sup> And so, in my use of the word, 'aetiological'!

hostility. Though von Rad completely misses the point of the marker itself<sup>761</sup> he makes some pertinent comments on the vocabulary used to describe the deed:

The word for infamous deed [in v 7, translated in the RSV as folly] (*n'bala*) is an ancient expression for the most serious kind of sexual evil. The references - especially Judg. 19.23 f.; 20.6 (Ex. 22.2) - reveal that surrounding this word was the horror of a sacrilege which incriminated the whole cultic community before God. The statement that "such a thing ought not to be done" (in Israel) was also an ancient formula expressing a tie with inviolable divine norms (11 Sam. 13.12).<sup>762</sup>

The Yahwist indicates his understanding of the gravity of the ideological danger presented by the Canaanites first by using the notion of a rape,<sup>763</sup> then by the vocabulary he employs to describe it (i.e. *n'bala*), and finally by the consequences of the rape, which take the form of the 'ban', the slaughter of every Canaanite male, man and child.

You will note that I have carefully refrained from speaking about punishment here. In the story of the lure of the garden it can certainly be said that Yahweh punishes those Canaanites living in the vicinity of Moab and Ammon by destroying them. In this story, however, the destruction of the Canaanites does not come by Yahweh's hands. Indeed it cannot even be said that Israel is responsible for exacting vengeance since the narrator is careful to leave Jacob out of it. In the story as it stands Simeon and Levi are the ones who do the deed. That said, all the indications are that originally it was the unnamed 'sons of Jacob' who were responsible, but who exactly do they represent? What are the implications of this curious discretion? Does it mean that we can then exonerate the Yahwist by saying that he intended to suggest that, whatever was to be said about the ideological dangers represented by the Canaanites, there was no way in which he could approve of the ban: a practice which anyone with a modicum of humanity must find repulsive and inexcusable? The story ends with an exchange of words between Jacob and his sons which may be suggestive of what the Yahwist had in mind:

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the Land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.' But they said 'Should he treat our sister as a harlot?'<sup>764</sup>

Von Rad sees this exchange as a comfortable scene added by later narrators which, as he says, 'gave them the possibility of putting some distance between the event on the one hand and themselves and the reader on the other.' One can't help thinking that in coming to this conclusion he was influenced by the criticism made against Simeon and Levi found in the so called blessings of Jacob in Chapter 49:

Simeon and Levi are brothers;  
Weapons of violence are their swords.  
O my soul, come not into their council;  
O my spirit, be not joined to their company;  
For in their anger they slay men,

<sup>761</sup> 'Israel thought very severely in these matters and knew herself to be uncompromisingly distinct from the Canaanites in the sexual realm (cf. Lev. 18.2 2 ff. ; 20.13-23)' Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 332.

<sup>762</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.332

<sup>763</sup> c.f. the intended homosexual rape in the 'Trapped by the Lure of the Garden' story (See pp. 210-211 above). Schechem's casual humbling of Dinah, so expressive of the radical inequality between marginals and centrarchs, clearly echoes Pharaoh's equally casual treatment of Sarah.

<sup>764</sup> Gen 34.30-31.

And in their wantonness they hamstring oxen.  
Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce  
And their wrath for it is cruel!  
I will divide them in Jacob  
And scatter them in Israel.<sup>765</sup>

The fact is, however, that while these so-called ‘blessings’, in condemning Simeon and Levi for their spirit of violence, may be said to offer the narrator and reader some minimal protection against the odium of the ban, Jacob’s final words to his sons in the actual story of Dinah’s rape can’t. For they simply make the strategic point that a community of former marginals is not in a position to deal with the backlash which such an act of terrorism will inevitably unleash from civilisation (sounds familiar?). Von Rad seems to be aware that there is a problem here, for he comments:

To be sure, Jacob’s role here is weak. His censure is more a peevish complaint.

However, Von Rad’s judgement is once again clearly wrong since, from a marginal’s point of view, there is nothing in the least bit weak or peevish in what Jacob says. Indeed we have good reason to suppose that if Israel, as a community of former marginals,<sup>766</sup> only ever *talked* about the ban it was for the very reason Jacob here outlines! We therefore have to come to terms with the fact that the Yahwist provides nothing to protect himself or his readers against the odium of the ban other than the fact that for purely strategic reasons it *may* never have been put into operation. For us civilisation folk this highly unsatisfactory state of affairs is strongly underlined by the way in which the Yahwist describes Israel’s ideological adversaries in the story. His remarkably succinct description of the brutal and perfidious behaviour of the Israelite marginals is only outdone by his wonderfully concise account of the trustworthy and accommodating, not to say gentlemanly, behaviour of the Canaanites. In short, what the Yahwist presents us with, in this masterful description of the political behaviour of what he clearly considered to be Israel’s most dangerous ideological adversary, is the epitome of what we as civilisation people ourselves aspire to, whereas what he presents us with in his equally masterful portrait of the political behaviour of the marginals themselves is the epitome of everything which we openly detest and unreservedly condemn! Surely this can be no accident!

Philip Davies has criticised biblical commentators for failing to recognise when the Bible advocates behaviour which is judged inadmissible by our modern, civilised standards, the ban surely being a case in point.<sup>767</sup> So what are we to do here, given that the Yahwist – even if for purely strategic reasons he stops short of actually advocating the ban – is certainly implying that the Canaanites are to be treated like the plague (if not for the moment actually obliterated) for having a standard of behaviour universally admired by people today? Though I am certainly prepared to admit that as a civilisation person myself I tend to view accommodating behaviour favourably and to find

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<sup>765</sup> Gen 49. 5-7.

<sup>766</sup> If such a community ever existed! See the danger of trusting too much in the historicity of the Bible. See p. 95 above.

<sup>767</sup> ‘... our annoyance needs to be directed against those who, while proclaiming a concern for ethics (Christian or otherwise), refuse to engage ethically with the Bible, which in many cases means resisting it. Many biblical scholars – ultimately, most, I fear – not only fail to criticise such systems in their Bible but even fail to identify them and analyse them.’ Davies, *Ethics* p. 173.

intolerance disgusting (as I rather fancy was the case with the Yahwist himself, for how otherwise could he have told such a brilliant story) I am more concerned to understand the point he was actually driving at, which must surely have been this: Though the god-of-the-marginals ideology is more than able to take care of itself and risks nothing in its juxtaposition with civilisation's hypocritical rationalisations (since it is such rationalisation, rather than the god-of-the-marginals ideology, which risks ridicule and exposure in such confrontations)<sup>768</sup> Israel herself is not in the same position. In her case all contacts with the Canaanites are fraught with terrible ideological danger. For she always risks being lulled into dropping her guard for considerations of decency and civilised compromise. She should therefore firmly ostracise the Canaanites, *for the more amicable and reasonable the more dangerous to her they are.*

Where then does this leave us all, with our civilisation virtue of tolerance? Outside the Kingdom, I would suggest. For clearly this so-called 'virtue' is designed to reinforce people in their dominating ways; *political accommodations, however civilised, are always made between coercive powers, and the Kingdom is only arrived at by giving up coercive power.* In other words, according to the Bible our great civilisation virtue of tolerance – so exquisitely honoured in ancient Greece – turns out in the light of the truth (as this is made known by viewing matters from a marginal perspective) to be nothing less than sheer hypocrisy; and the worst of it is that honesty forces us to justify the Bible's marginal perspective against our own profoundly comfortable, civilisation point of view.

### *The Sacrifice of Isaac*

Before moving on to the third and final series of stories in Genesis we need to deal briefly with the two 'promise' narratives mentioned above<sup>769</sup> which have no apparent connection with the ideological-geography structure. At first sight the sacrifice of Isaac<sup>770</sup> and Jacob's wrestling with the angel<sup>771</sup> – remarkable stories in their own right – couldn't be more different. However, closer inspection shows that in fact they deal with the same basic question, their insights, though different, being complementary. The basic question they both seek to answer in their own ways is this: What constitutes true 'revolutionary' behaviour in Israel? An ideological analysis of the first story shows that the Yahwist is here describing Israel's 'revolutionary' faithfulness in terms of submission. He sees the community as being faithful to the god of the marginals when she performs her part of the covenant bargain, leaving the business of her vindication in Yahweh's hands. In other words he claims quite simply that Israel is being 'revolutionary' when she demonstrates her confidence that the god of the marginals is in the process of carrying out his covenant obligation, whatever appearances there may be to the contrary. The story accomplishes this purport by setting up a predicament in which Yahweh tests Abraham's faith to the limit, to the

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<sup>768</sup> Both of the Abraham versions of 'the Wife Passed off as the Sister' stories show Yahweh as more than capable of looking after his own interests. See Gen 12.17 & 20.3-7.

<sup>769</sup> See p. 203 above.

<sup>770</sup> Gen 22.1-14.

<sup>771</sup> Gen 32.24-32.

point at which he is obliged to contemplate the worst possible scenario – the sacrifice of the promise itself in the form of his son Isaac.

### *Jacob Wrestles with the Angel*

If the story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel adds to this picture it is in portraying Israel's 'revolutionary' faithfulness positively rather than negatively, in terms of aggression rather than submission. It is as if the Yahwist wanted to discourage the idea, possibly wrongly taken from his first story, that Israel could be faithful simply by sitting tight and doing nothing, waiting for God to save her. With this in mind he tells a story in which Jacob is shown as vindicated through struggle. As the angel himself declares "You have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."<sup>772</sup>

Ideologically, what the Yahwist's means in saying that *faithful Israel prevails with men* is that her performance is seen to be persuasive. In spite of themselves the other nations come to see that Israel's strategy – helping the other to be free<sup>773</sup> – produces a better and more prosperous human society than the normal centrarchical way in which an attempt is made to secure freedom at the other's expense. The surrounding story makes this clear by showing Jacob as materially prospering despite all adversities *and his brother Esau not being jealous*.<sup>774</sup> This, of course, is in sharp contrast to what happened at the beginning of the story, when Esau threatened to kill Jacob because the latter had stolen his blessing.<sup>775</sup>

Again, ideologically, what the Yahwist means in saying that *faithful Israel prevails with God* is that in passing the test, through aggressive struggle rather than limp passivity, she becomes Yahweh's equal. In other words the Yahwist claims that there is no ideological difference between the marginal ideology itself and the servant of the marginal ideology behaving as such. This is a point which, though ideologically obvious, is religiously scandalous. It seems to me that what we have here is the very same ideologically obvious yet religiously scandalous conclusion as that drawn by the early Church when it proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God *because it found his attitude and behaviour entirely at one with that of Yahweh the god of the marginals*.

### *The Third Series*

We come finally to the third set of stories dealing with the sons of Jacob, now renamed Israel.<sup>776</sup> At first sight the transition looks straightforward. If the stories in the previous series, involving the representative personalities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, deal with Israel's foreign policy, which is to say with the attitude the Yahwist believed Israel should adopt towards the other communities in its world, then it would seem

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<sup>772</sup> Gen 32.28.

<sup>773</sup> 'Loving the neighbour'

<sup>774</sup> Gen 33.1-20. See also Gen.21.22 &30.27

<sup>775</sup> See also the story of the Philistines who *became envious* because of Jacob's prosperity. Gen 26. 12-16.

<sup>776</sup> Gen 35-50.



logical to suppose that these stories about the sons of Jacob deal with Israel's internal relations. We cannot identify the writer as the Yahwist until we have verified the stories' 'revolutionary' credentials. That said he continues to use the special descriptive techniques concerning ideological relationship found in the first two series, namely *the corporate personality*, *the sex marker*, and *the younger son inheritance* and this may suggest an unbroken continuity.

However, things are not always as they at first seem and we do not have to go far to understand why. In describing 'exterior relations' the use of these special techniques naturally tend to highlight Israel's ideological unity and common destiny; however, in describing 'interior relations' the use of the same techniques naturally tends to highlight the community's ideological disunity and fragmentation. The only way of avoiding this unfortunate implication is to drop the ideological angle altogether and employ the techniques in a completely different way: as *post eventum* explanations of significant historical developments within the community. Thus, whereas in the first and second series we find the Yahwist using these techniques *existentially* to talk about Israel's current ideological dilemmas, in this third series we find the writer using the same techniques *historically*, to explain the diverse fortunes of the tribal entities of which Israel was composed. In this way he uses stories about the selection of Joseph and Ephraim over their elder brothers<sup>777</sup> to explain why the tribe of Ephraim became the dominant force in the northern kingdom, and a story about Reuben's bedding of one of his father's concubines<sup>778</sup> to explain why this tribal group curiously failed to fulfil its potential. In the case of the stories involving Onan, Tamar and Judah<sup>779</sup> we are presented with an explanation as to why the tribe of Judah was, apparently, historically *delayed* in coming into her proper inheritance. I can only suppose that when it came to the business of highlighting Judah's ultimately dominant place in Israelite history the writer found it inappropriate to use the same technique for we find him spelling things out directly in the form of a prophecy:

Judah your brothers shall praise you;  
 Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
 Your father's sons shall bow down before you.  
 Judah is a lion's whelp;  
 From the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
 He stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness;  
 who dares rouse him up?  
 The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,  
 Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs;  
 And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.  
 Binding his foal to the vine  
 And his ass's colt to the choice vine,  
 He washes his garments in wine  
 And his vesture in the blood of grapes;  
 His eyes shall be red with wine'  
 And his teeth white with milk.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>777</sup> Gen. 37. 2-11, 48. 17-22.

<sup>778</sup> Gen 35. 22, 49. 4.

<sup>779</sup> Gen 38. 8-10; 12-26.

<sup>780</sup> Gen. 49. 8-12.

This may be magnificent poetry but from the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' standpoint it is quite dreadful ideology. What we see in this case is clear signs of revisionism in which the excruciatingly difficult business of *finding salvation through reactive struggle and faith*<sup>781</sup> is abandoned in favour of the much more straightforward and less costly business of *achieving continuity through proactive search for power and dominance*. This can only mean that we are dealing with P, or if not actually with the man himself then with one of his ideological friends!

You may have noticed that all the stories which we have so far referred to in this third series are taken from either its beginning or its end. As such they could be described as bracketing what some have called the Joseph novella; the extended narrative found in Chapters 37; 39–47; and 50.<sup>782</sup> This particular story is quite unlike anything else found in Genesis. Not only is it said to be remarkably free of extraneous matter but it is also unusually well constructed, forming as it does an extensive, consecutive narrative with a distinctive plot and dramatic denouement. This, however, did not prevent some twentieth century source critics from attributing it to the Yahwist without necessarily claiming that he actually wrote it himself.<sup>783</sup> In our own case, of course, it is nothing but ideological content which determines whether or not we attribute a story to him. It makes little difference therefore what style it is written in for we are not primarily concerned with literary achievement. If we can establish that this Joseph story continues in the same 'revolutionary' vein as the other stories we have already attributed to the Yahwist then I see no reason why we should not attribute it also to the him. But can we establish this story's 'revolutionary' credentials?

There are certainly a number of things to be said in favour of viewing the Joseph story as a 'revolutionary' text. In the first place it not only applies the Yahwist's own 'revolutionary' term 'Hebrew' to Joseph but it also uses it in a proper manner: as a technical expression used by Egyptian centrachs to denote dustbinned, political refugees.<sup>784</sup> In the second place the story also envisions a process which, for the most part, is non-coercive in that Joseph manages to prosper, not by asserting and defending his interests but by exploiting the fact that he is blessed by Yahweh with special insight. Thirdly, it envisions the marginal as not just saving his own community but also of effectively saving civilisation as well. It has to be said that these are real qualities, raising the story well above your average civilisation-hero legend of the Greek, Roman, Egyptian or Mesopotamian variety. That said, it has to be recognised that it falls far short of being truly 'revolutionary' and so of meriting the Yahwist *appellation controlée*. For though it sees everyone as being *saved from starvation* it in no way envisages civilisation itself as being shamed and transformed, thereby bringing about true salvation, which is to say *freedom from marginalization*. In other words this is the story of a marginal who becomes a civilisation hero, not the story of a marginal hero who creates a movement which eventually forces civilisation to face up to its

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<sup>781</sup> Paul's hope against hope.

<sup>782</sup> See Von Rad, *Genesis* pp. 347-8.

<sup>783</sup> 'It is impossible to say whether the author whose hand is manifest throughout the whole book of Genesis, and whom we have called the Yahwist, has written this story; but, whether he wrote it or not, it is clear that he used it with deliberate purpose, and that it is an essential part of his salvation history.' S. H. Hooke, *Peake's* p. 200.

<sup>784</sup> See Gen. 39. 17; 40. 15; and 43. 32.

shameful, marginalizing ways. In this respect it is to be noted that Joseph does not place his special insights at the disposition of his fellow marginals but uses them rather to make friends in high places. In other words he puts them *directly* at the disposition of civilisation rather than *indirectly*, as is the case in the true ‘revolutionary’ strategy where insight comes only *through the process of being shamed*. New Testament writers make the same point by insisting that insight must come by way of μετανοια (a radical change involving repentance). What Joseph offers Pharaoh is cheap salvation, a removal of his problems, requiring no change of heart.<sup>785</sup> It is also to be noted that when Joseph gains power he is not averse to using it to manipulate his own family and to bankrupt and enslave the Egyptian populace.<sup>786</sup> These are certainly not considerations which our Yahwist would have been blind to. Consequently, if we attribute the story to him it has to be seen as a description of a false route ending in disaster and from which Moses, the true marginal hero, was later obliged to rescue the community. But that in itself would mean reading the story *historically* rather than *existentially* – as an Exodus rather than as a Genesis text – which simply will not do. So it seems to me that we are obliged to see the Joseph novella as yet another piece of revisionism to add to our growing list of texts produced by P and his friends.

### *The Origin Tradition*

In order to understand what has been going on we will have to elicit some outside help. In his analysis of these texts<sup>787</sup> T. L. Thompson recognises none of the structures we have identified above. He makes nothing of the relational aspect of the representative personality, shows no signs of understanding what the sex marker is all about, and reduces the typical younger-son inheritance to ‘the folktale motif of the success of the unpromising’<sup>788</sup> (Aesop’s hare and tortoise story?). In itself this is hardly surprising since all of these conventions are intimately connected with the Yahwist’s ‘revolutionary’ theses and, as establishment clerk, Thompson is constitutionally blind to such things.<sup>789</sup> That said, he does identify a whole series of structures which we ourselves have not yet spoken about. He sees these as literary developments, layers of strata which successively build up to form what he calls *the origin tradition as a whole*.<sup>790</sup> This comprises the first half of the Hebrew Bible from the beginning of Genesis right the way through to the end of 2 Kings.<sup>791</sup>

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<sup>785</sup> The paradox is that this kind of salvation is what all of us long and, as civilizational people, are prepared to pay good money to get hold of. We find real salvation much less interesting since civilisation finds the taste quite disgusting and will put you away if you ever have the temerity to try and hawk it.

<sup>786</sup> Gen. 47. 13-21

<sup>787</sup> In *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel, 1: the literary formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23*.

<sup>788</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 161. c.f. p. 168.

<sup>789</sup> As are 95% of biblical scholars, Norman Gottwald and perhaps Walter Brueggemann being rare exceptions to this general rule.

<sup>790</sup> This is to be distinguished from the *Origin tradition* itself which is composed of Genesis and Exodus 1.23.

<sup>791</sup> ‘In the received text, the origin tradition as a whole is within a yet greater story context, which we might speak of minimally as the Pentateuch, but, perhaps better: as the narrative tradition which extends to the end of 2 Kings.’ Thompson, *Origin* p. 65.

*Smaller units and tales.*

The first layer of this literary development which Thompson identifies is composed of simple stories, each having a clearly defined beginning, an ending and a recognisable plot. He asserts that these stories may have been invented for the occasion. However, he believes that most were probably traditional.

*Larger, compound tales.*

The second layer Thompson identifies is composed of larger composite stories. They too have clearly defined beginnings, endings and plots:

The Wandering of Abraham stories

The Abraham and Lot stories

The Abraham and Ishmael stories

The Jacob-Esau stories

The Jacob-Laban stories

The Rachel-Leah stories

The Joseph entry into Egypt stories

The Joseph faithful servant stories

The Joseph saviour stories

*The traditional complex-chain narrative*

A third layer Thompson calls the traditional complex-chain narrative. This is a composite structure made up of a number of individual stories welded together end to end. Thompson believes that the individual components making up these complex-chain narratives may have been pre-existing stories. However, he claims that strung together they have to be seen as comprising newly created entities, each with its own beginning, ending, and distinctive theme and plot line. Thompson identifies six of these structures in *The Origin Tradition (Genesis and Exodus 1-23.)*:<sup>792</sup>

1. The Abraham chain narrative
2. The Jacob chain narrative
3. The Joseph chain narrative
4. The Passover chain narrative
5. The Exodus chain narrative
6. The Torah chain narrative

He identifies a seventh block of continuous narration – what we have ourselves called the myth cycle in Genesis 1-11 – which he believes was constructed ‘for introductory and editorial purposes’.<sup>793</sup> Thompson claims that such chain narratives can be identified by the fact that they all start with a series of three episodes which together perform specific functions. These episodes (short stories) state the theme of the overall chain narrative and frequently give it its context. They also constitute the first step in the plot line of the greater story and set the mode of its resolution.<sup>794</sup>

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<sup>792</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 63

<sup>793</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 157

<sup>794</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p158.

### *The Toledoth structure*<sup>795</sup>

The fourth layer Thompson identifies is the Toledoth or Generation structure (Toledoth being the word translated as 'generation' in our English texts of the Bible.) Reading the book of Genesis one notices that a recurring pattern of words regularly punctuates the text, breaking it into segments:

Gen 2.4	“These are the generations of the heaven and earth.”
Gen 5.1	“This is the book of the generations of Adam.”
Gen 6.9	“These are the generation of Noah.”
Gen 10.1	“These are the generations of the sons of Noah.”
Gen 11.10	“These are the generations of Shem.”
Gen 11.27	“These are the generations of Terah.”
Gen 25.12	“These are the generations of Ishmael.”
Gen 25.19	“These are the generations of Isaac.”
Gen 36.1	“These are the generations of Esau.”
Gen 36.9	“These are the generations of Esau.”
Gen 37.2	“These are the generation of Jacob.”

This is the Toledoth structure and according to Thompson it ‘holds together the successive narrative blocks of Genesis 1- Exodus 23 as a story unit, and gives it the form of an account of Israel’s origin.’<sup>796</sup> By this he means that the imposition of the Toledoth structure created an historical fiction by which the community explained itself to itself.<sup>797</sup>

### *The post Toledoth redaction*

Thompson identifies a final layer of literary development which he calls the post Toledoth redaction. By this he means the editorial process which knitted these Toledoth origin traditions together with other material to form first the Pentateuch and then the origin traditions as a whole, i.e. Genesis to 2 Kings.

Let me say immediately that I have no quarrel with Thompson as regards the existence of these structures – at least as far as the book of Genesis is concerned. However, what interests me is their ideological colour. For as I see it there is no way in which we can determine how such structures function around the Yahwist’s central ‘revolutionary’ corpus (which we ourselves have identified) until this matter has been properly settled. In his book on the origin tradition of Ancient Israel Thompson shows surprisingly little interest in ideological matters. He restricts himself to a few throw-away lines about the community seeing itself as having a special relationship with Yahweh<sup>798</sup> who had

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<sup>795</sup> See Thompson, *Origin* p.64

<sup>796</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 64.

<sup>797</sup> ‘What they conceived as ‘historiography’ were historical fictions about the past, using whatever material came to hand. What we learn when we read them is not data about an earlier period of the past, but rather an account of what they thought, and what they understood to belong to the genre of literature they were writing.’ Thompson, *Bible* p. 10.

<sup>798</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 203

called them into existence, imparted to them his great gift of monotheism<sup>799</sup> and Torah,<sup>800</sup> and who had given them their land as a possession, with the promise to make them into a great nation.<sup>801</sup> My impression is that if this is the case it is not just because, like so many other biblical scholars, he has failed to equip himself with the necessary tools to identify ideologies. It is also because he labours under the impression that it is not safe to try and identify the ideology of a text unless and until you have established the writer's social, historical and geographical circumstances, since it is generally understood that the ideology of a text is a reflection of these things. In the book itself, written in 1987, Thompson has virtually nothing to say about the social milieu of the creators of the origin tradition and he only tentatively suggests that the tradition itself should be dated to around the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the time of the Josiah reformation.<sup>802</sup> However, in a later work, *The Bible in History*, written in 1999, he clearly identifies the biblical writers as an intellectual, pietistic and sectarian elite<sup>803</sup> living in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period<sup>804</sup> – making them, in our terms 'friends of P'. As a result of this identification he is much more forthcoming about their ideology:

It is a moral world of black and white, of good and evil locked in eternal conflict. The reader is offered a radical choice. One walks either in the 'path of righteousness', in the 'way of the Torah', in 'God's way', or one 'walks in the way of sinners', and 'seeks the counsel of the godless'. There is no middle way and no alternative to this choice. This sectarian mode of seeing reality is behind the varying contrasts so constantly reiterated in the biblical narratives of old Israel as rejected, standing against a new Israel of promise. The story of Israel's origins as a people is the story of Exodus: an old Israel of slavery in Egypt leads through a wilderness crossing to a new life, a return to a land that Yahweh has prepared. The story of testing and purification in the desert crossing with Moses has not only created a metaphorical paradigm for countless stories answering to the human longing for hope and salvation from oppression, it already reflects an established biblical metaphor and tale-type that is reiterated throughout the Bible.<sup>805</sup>

The central motifs of an 'old' and 'new' Israel are linked together in the single dominant metaphor of biblical philosophy: the theology of the way. Old Israel walked in the way of the godless, but the new Israel fears God, trusts in Yahweh, loves the *torah*.<sup>806</sup>

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<sup>799</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 84

<sup>800</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 64.

<sup>801</sup> Thompson, *Origin* p. 159.

<sup>802</sup> 'This argument necessarily suggests that the pentateuchal historiography, in its united form, tracing the origin of Israel from the call of Abraham in Mesopotamia through successive patriarchs, the sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus, and wilderness wanderings, is a product of late seventh or early sixth centuries, at least as it serves as a axiom of Israel's self-understanding.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 193. See also p. 51.

<sup>803</sup> 'When we ask for whom the Bible was written, it is hardly a particular historical event that confronts us. It is in the historical context of an intellectual world of piety and philosophy that sees itself in terms of a very emphatic construct. I would describe this as a learned world of discourse and commentary, centred in a philosophical discussion about tradition. This world is sectarian in its structure. It is created by those who understand themselves as seekers after truth.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 42.

<sup>804</sup> 'The formation of the biblical narrative was a process that created the Israel we know. It had its earliest roots in the period of Assyria's domination of Palestine, but the understanding we know from the tradition first arose during the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, and was not fully developed before the time of the Macabees. Long after the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem, in the course of the gradual restructuring of Persia's conquered territories by both the Persian and their Hellenistic successors, the Israel of tradition presented itself to history, like the phoenix, specifically in the form of an Israel redivivus.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 81

<sup>805</sup> Thompson, *Bible* p. 41

<sup>806</sup> Thompson, *Bible* pp. 237-8

Clearly there is nothing here of the Yahwist's idea that Israel's task is to perform a shaming exercise which in itself necessitates a trust that Yahweh, as god of the marginals, will vindicate his servant, a trust which is especially necessary when events make it appear foolish. What we have is rather the idea that Israel's task is to carry out Yahweh's instructions, whether they appear to be sensible or simply to lead to grief, because as the metacosmic god he represents the only possible way of truly distinguishing good from bad and right from wrong.

All that happens are events to be accepted. Good is not as men see it, but rather, only that is good which God sees as good. That is the central message. . . . The will of God is not what men will have it. . . . The way of the godless and the torah's path, the will of men and the will of God, are the fundamental alternatives in life. One lives with choices and these are voiced without compromise.<sup>807</sup>

This, of course, makes these friends of P classical, biblical revisionists as we have previously described the phenomenon: an abandonment of the *god of the marginals* and a glorification of the *metacosmic god* in order to fill the vacant space.

It has to be understood that what Thompson is describing here is the ideology associated with the various strata of editorial work manifest in *The Toledoth Structure* and *The Post Toledoth Redaction*. He himself makes a very clear distinction between these *editorial* exercises, which eventually climax in the text as we know it,<sup>808</sup> and the complex chain-narratives which, as he sees it, use pre-existing traditional material to produce completely new stories and, as such, constitute literary works in their own right rather than editorial manipulations.<sup>809</sup> Thompson believes that the existence of these chain-narratives as literary entities constitutes a refutation of the documentary hypothesis. He argues that since no consistent ideological position can be identified in the lower strata of the *Smaller Units and Tales* and *Larger Compound Tales*,<sup>810</sup> we are obliged to recognise these complex-chain narratives as constituting the earliest literary level found in the biblical texts. Given this position and given the fact that these complex-chain narratives themselves cut across the so-called J,E, and P documents, in being composed indiscriminately of material from each of them, it stands to reason, Thompson maintains, that these so-called documents can never have existed<sup>811</sup> and that they are simply the creation of scholarly imagination.<sup>812</sup>

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<sup>807</sup> Thompson, *Bible* pp. 58-9.

<sup>808</sup> 'This extended *Toledoth* structure is a redactional process which holds together large blocks of narrative . . .' Thompson, *Bible* p. 65.

<sup>809</sup> ' . . . chain narratives . . . link together a succession of smaller narratives in such a way as to develop a distinctive theme and plot-line, creating thereby an entity that is greater than the successive units which make it up. . . . it is . . . a fully conscious story, having its own interpretive contexts, and requires its own exegesis.' Thompson, *Bible* pp. 157-8.

<sup>810</sup> ' . . . there does not seem to have been any prior extended narrative, whereby two or more of these stories were related in a meaningful units. Certainly, the hypothesis of an extended Yahwistic document, with its own theology of an increasing corruption of human nature, has little to support it.' Thompson, *Origin* pp. 207-8.

<sup>811</sup> 'The affirmation of the [traditional complex-chain narratives] existence is a refutation of the documentary hypothesis.' Thompson, *Origin* pp. 63-4.

<sup>812</sup> '[hypothetical larger "documents"] are rather intellectually coherent structures and thematic constructs of the modern reader of ancient tradition.' Thompson, *Origin*. p. 67.

Though Thompson is perfectly justified in saying that it is not possible to extract a Yahwistic salvation history or redemption theology *à la* Von Rad from the Genesis texts he is quite wrong to use this argument to justify his conclusion that, therefore, no consistent ideological position can be found in the lowest strata. For if you look at the stories he has listed amongst the *Smaller Units and Tales* and *Larger Compound Tales* you will find, surprisingly enough, everything which makes up the two strands<sup>813</sup> which, when woven together, constitute the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' thesis as we ourselves have described it.<sup>814</sup> The fact that Thompson is blind to this 'revolutionary' structure and ideology cannot be taken as proof that it does not exist. He argues that 'the documentary theory of source criticism founders when it is stressed that the very substance of the hypothetical, extensive, and complicated narrative traditions or documents such as J and E are essentially missing links *which are not observable in any extensive or convincing detail.*'<sup>815</sup> However, the existence of my J as an ideologically integrated, 'revolutionary' document is as materially observable as the nose on Thompson's face, though of course you have to be ideologically aware to see it (as marginals generally are though biblical scholars apparently are not) and a friend of the marginals to want to see it.

But what about the ideological colour of these complex-chain narratives and what can their ideological colour tell us about the way in which they perform as regards the Yahwist's central 'revolutionary' document – for a document it must certainly have been, given the way in which P and his friends have clearly treated it?

Thompson identifies six complex-chain narratives. However, only three of them are found in Genesis. Moreover, two of the three which he identifies in Exodus are somewhat unconvincing.<sup>816</sup> This leaves us with three units to analyse as regards their ideological content.

### *1. The Abraham chain narrative*

This narrative is introduced by three crisp episodes (Gen 12.4-7, Gen 12.8-9, and Gen 13.14-18) which can be excised without in any way undermining the Yahwist's Abraham story, thus evidencing the chain narrative structure. As Thompson rightly says, these episodes tell how Abraham passes through the land, builds an altar and speaks or is spoken to by Yahweh. They collectively establish and emphasise a particular point: that the land is given to Israel by Yahweh as a possession. The third episode also adds the rider that Yahweh will see to it that Israel will prosper. As Thompson himself puts it:

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<sup>813</sup> of *Ideological Geography and Covenantal Promise*

<sup>814</sup> The story of the rape of Dinah is not actually mentioned, of course, because it is not a compound tale. It comes under the category of *Smaller Units or Tales*.

<sup>815</sup> My italics. Thompson, *Origin* p. 67.

<sup>816</sup> The three episodes which in Thompson, *Origin* p. 67, are said to open the *Passover* and *Exodus* chain narratives – Ex 1.7-14; 1.15-21; and 1.22-2.10 – are in no way extractable from the following story since without them the story itself makes no sense. As I see it therefore they cannot be editorial features but have to be taken as integral parts of the story. The three episodes which are said to open the Torah chain narrative – Ex 15.23-26; 16; and 17.1-7 – are more convincing even though the second episode appears to me to be rather too long to call an episode.



Abraham is the faithful worshiper of Yahweh and wanders from place to place throughout Palestine. In response to his faithfulness, Yahweh promises to Abraham all the land that he can see to hold as his own, not so much for now, as forever. Yahweh further promises that Abraham's descendants, who will possess this land, will be almost infinite in number.<sup>817</sup>

How are we to judge ideologically this scenario concerning Israel's possession of the land? In the Yahwists' 'revolutionary' scheme the promised land figures as a defensible space exterior to Egypt, in which Israel can fulfil her obligation to set up a demonstration of a way of living different from that encountered in civilisation. This demonstration, which will bring Israel true prosperity by avoiding the pitfalls encountered in the civilisation way, will, in the end, shame the nations into changing their civilisation ways and bring salvation by banishing the phenomenon of marginalization from the face of the earth. This, effectively, is what we see described very precisely and succinctly in Genesis 12.1-3:

Now the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those that bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

What we have in the three episodes which, as Thompson says, open the Abraham chain narrative, is a complete deconstruction and transformation of this 'revolutionary' scenario. Here the land is no longer an appropriate and temporarily defensible arena on which to mount a 'revolutionary' demonstration. Rather it becomes an inalienable possession and terrain of domination, the sort of operational base which all hierarchical powers strive after. What is more, in these episodes success is no longer seen as *the natural outcome of a 'revolutionary' way of living* that can be replicated by any community which has a mind to follow Israel's lead. Here, success is envisaged as an arbitrary bestowal of fortune on a favourite, by a god who acts like a king or centrarch. In short, what we have here, once again, is a prime example of biblical revisionism.

But what about Genesis 17 which describes Yahweh's covenant with Abraham in these terms?

"Behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a god to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."<sup>818</sup>

What we see here in this passage, attributed by source critics to P, is the self-same revisionism in which Israel's dominion of the land and future success are seen as kingly favours bestowed on her for toeing the line. However, what we also see is a characteristic *Toledoth* historicizing of the text. For in this text we are no longer, with the Yahwist, viewing matters *existentially*, from the perspective of Israel as an

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<sup>817</sup> Thompson, *Origin* pp. 158-9.

<sup>818</sup> Gen 17. 4-8.

inhabitant of the land contemplating her ideological obligations. Now we are clearly, with P, viewing matters *historically* from the perspective of someone intent on using the traditional material at hand to create for himself and his kind an imaginary past which justifies his own position. What all of this suggests rather strongly is that this chain narrative construct is by no means a literary device whereby a writer uses traditional material to create what amounts to a new story, as Thompson supposes. What we have here looks much more like an editorial exercise in which elements have been injected into a pre-existing ‘revolutionary’ narrative, in order to control it by first obscuring its upsetting exigencies and then by offering in their place vastly more comfortable alternatives which flatter rather than challenge the position of the editor.

## 2. *The Jacob chain narrative*

This narrative is also introduced by three crisp episodes (Gen 25.22-23; Gen 25.24-26; and Gen 25.27-34) which can be excised without in any way undermining the following story, thereby evidencing the existence of a chain narrative. These episodes together work to establish a particular ideological reading of the narrative as a whole, along the following lines:

Israel is in competition with Edom<sup>819</sup> (and, by inference, with the world at large) and though her position is less promising she will by ruthless endeavour,<sup>820</sup> eventually come to dominate.<sup>821</sup> This will inevitably cause Edom (and the world in general) to hate her but time will heal and matters will eventually be resolved, by each one going their own way.<sup>822</sup>

It has to be admitted that these three episodes impose an interesting and integrated ideological reading on the narrative as a whole. It is, however, far removed from the ‘revolutionary’ one provided in the first place by the Yahwist himself. Here, if you will remember, Edom was presented as Israel’s indistinguishable ideological twin. According to the Yahwist the problem she represents for Israel as a ‘revolutionary’ community was structural, not ideological. Because Israel found it necessary to envisage her ideological position as that between a community and its god, this meant that inevitably, in her eyes, Edom found herself unprivileged by the simple fact of standing over against Israel as one community to another. The Yahwist’s Jacob and Esau story highlights this embarrassing dilemma and concludes rather lamely that a time will eventually come when Edom will break free of her unprivileged position *vis-à-vis* Israel in an as yet unforeseeable manner. There is of course nothing of this bad-conscience understanding to be found in the three episodes which introduce the Jacob chain narrative as it now stands. They impose a very different domination ideology, an ideology which, as we have found, is characteristic of P and his friends. So, once again, what we see here in the chain narrative is clearly an editorial attempt to suffocate the Yahwist’s embarrassing ideological reflections and to impose on the text

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<sup>819</sup> ‘The [first] episode makes a prediction of conflict between Jacob and Esau, and gives the interpretation that both children will be ancestors of the nations of Edom and Israel.’ Thompson, *Origin* p. 161.

<sup>820</sup> ‘The ruthless character of Jacob comes to the fore, and Esau is given cause to hate Jacob (so, Gen. 27.36).’ Thompson, *Origin* p. 161.

<sup>821</sup> ‘...the younger Jacob will overcome the elder in the conflict.’ Thompson, *Origin* p. 161.

<sup>822</sup> ‘The plot-line builds tension .... And does not come to rest until the resolution of Esau’s hatred for Jacob in Gen 33.15-17, when Esau departs for Seir and Jacob settles in the promised land at Succoth.’ Thompson, *Origin* p. 161.

a very different ideological colour, one which comforts and sustains the privileged status of the post-exilic priestly editors.

### *3. The Joseph chain narrative*

This narrative too is introduced by three crisp episodes (Gen 37.2-4; Gen 37.5-8; and Gen 37.9-10). However it has to be said that it is simply not possible to excise all of them without damaging the following narrative, for some reason has to be offered to explain why Joseph's brothers were so anxious to be rid of him. It also has to be admitted that these episodes seem in no way to be at odds with the ideology contained in the following narrative, nor can it be said that they seek to impose a new understanding on it. The reason for this is very obvious. The narrative already contains a revisionist ideology with which P and his friends would have been very comfortable, so why would they want to undermine it?

### *Conclusion*

Where then does all this leave us? We have confined ourselves to the employment of ideological analysis which, though it may sound like a difficult and complicated business, is in fact – unlike linguistic analysis – a procedure well within the competence of all and sundry. Indeed, everyone uses it all of the time in distinguishing, for example, the Sun newspaper from the Mirror and the Guardian from the Daily Mail. What we have discovered by using this technique alone to extract the 'revolutionary' texts found in the first two books of the Bible, are two powerful documents: the one in Exodus ostensibly offering an historical account of the first stages of the marginal 'revolution' and the other in Genesis offering a description of the existential predicament of the 'revolutionary' community already established in the highlands of central Palestine. Overlying this we have also found a whole series of redactional manipulations expressly designed 1) to hide, suffocate and obscure this highly uncomfortable and challenging 'revolutionary' scenario and 2) to impose a reading on the documents which would without doubt have flattered and comforted the elitist and sectarian sensibilities of the very people who, biblical scholarship tells us, were responsible for creating the text of the Bible as we now know it. This is not a very complicated picture, so it seems to me. Indeed it is just the sort of thing we all know goes on in society. However, its unravelling has defied the joint resources of worldwide twentieth century academic scholarship, leaving it up to a fool like me to spell it out!

### *The general process*

The Yahwist writes his two documents – completely independent texts, though for obvious reasons better read with Exodus coming first. These texts are then ideologically sanitised by P and his friends in a number of different ways. For example Genesis 2-3 is controlled by adding Genesis 1, and Genesis 4 is rectified by interjecting Genesis 9.1-17 etc. etc. Though these secondary redactional manipulations can take many different forms they always have the same effect in that they cover up what is a political ideology of 'revolution' by superimposing on it a

religious ideology of dominance. Or, to put it another way, they write out the god of the marginals and write up the metacosmic god. Someway along the line, at the moment of the *Toledoth* redaction, P and his friends then decide to use the by now ideologically safe documents to create an origins tradition. This necessitates tying Genesis and Exodus together in that order. This, however, creates a problem because Exodus is written in an historical mode and Genesis is an aetiological text written in an existential mode, as from the point of view of a community already established in central Palestine. Genesis therefore has to be changed, not only so that it reads historically but also so that it ends up in Egypt rather than in central Palestine. This is achieved, first by imposing the *Toledoth* structure (including the complex chain-narrative structure which we now realise is also an editorial feature) and second by adding to the patriarchal stories what appears to be a new series dealing with Jacob's sons, but which in effect is basically the Joseph novella slightly padded out. This is an astute move because the Joseph novella can be read both existentially as a revisionist success story and historically as a failure, thus leading naturally into the Exodus and Israel's true liberation story.

This protracted editorial exercise whereby P and his friends first made safe the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' documents, and then went on to produce the politically powerful though religiously highly questionable status quo text we now possess, is certainly a very complicated and involved business. So we should be thankful to people like Thompson who have largely worked out how it was done. However, to pretend, as he and others do, that that was all the Jewish Bible ever consisted of – by turning a blind eye to the Yahwist's underlying 'revolutionary' documents – is just about the craziest thing I can imagine. Do Thompson and Davies really expect us to believe that this priestly ideology (which they themselves describe as elitist, pietistic, sectarian, intellectual and totalitarian) is *all* that there is to be found in these ancient biblical texts? If that indeed were the case there would be little point in studying them and one would have to pity those who have spent a lifetime pondering on such material. I would therefore ask Thompson and Davies to turn their attention away from the priestly writer and his friends and to fix it instead on that which makes the Bible, at it best, an incredibly challenging, though admittedly frightening and uncomfortable ideological work. In doing so they will rescue themselves from their, at present, rather pointless (though materially comfortable) existence and open themselves up to the Yahwist's vital 'revolutionary' challenge.

*We create problems for ourselves with false assumptions*

In reading over the above analysis of the Genesis myths and the Patriarchal stories, I have to admit that I find myself wondering once again why it was necessary for the Yahwist to communicate his political ideas, regarding Israel's relationship with the surrounding world, in such curiously oblique, religious and sexual terms? Surely it would have been possible for him to denounce the centrarchal societies which had marginalised him and his community and to express his solidarity along with criticisms of the other surrounding marginalised communities, without resorting to this confusing language? It is, of course, perfectly natural to have such a reaction but it is important to realise from whence it stems. I was raised within a civilisation that declares itself to be built, at least in part, on Scripture. I tend therefore to assume that the Bible was in a

sense written for people like me even though I am aware it was composed a very long time ago. This being the case I tend to make two further assumptions about it. First, expecting the Bible to support my unexamined civilisation principles and I am a bit nonplussed when I find it denigrating them instead. Second, expecting it to use my own communication techniques, I am a little surprised by its apparent obsession with sex and violence and a bit mystified by what seems to me to be its silence on ideological matters and concentration on religion instead.

My mistake, of course, is to make all the wrong assumptions. The fact is that the Yahwists' text was not made for civilisation people like me but for people who saw themselves as living in a Hebrew/marginal tradition consciously set over against the centrarchal civilisation of their day. Likewise, it was not couched in my own direct-communication linguistics since such a technology didn't exist when it came to the business of ideological discussion. I can communicate with great ease about the marginalising attitudes and behaviour engendered by centrarchal society and about the development of a centrarchal ideology to rationalise these; and I can speak about the Yahwist's advocacy of the god-of-the-marginals counter-ideology in which centrarchal attitudes and behaviour were condemned and the centrarchal rationalising mocked. But such talk was completely beyond the Yahwist which means that I must make an effort to understand his figurative, symbolic and representational techniques which are as alien to me as analytical language would have been to him.

There is, of course, a further point we civilisation folk should also bear in mind when reading Biblical texts. People like the Yahwist who choose to speak from a marginal point of view are always at a disadvantage because language itself tends to be a structure of civilisation. I myself have found it impossible to come up with a really suitable word to describe the Hebrew's Category One crime meriting nothing less than death. It's not that I am at all uncertain as to what it is. Having worked for many years as a hospital porter I have regularly seen something approximating to it in people's eyes and felt its effect. It is quite simply the dust-binning of people, the treatment of them as if they were of no account. I have chosen to call it 'hubris' and 'contempt'.<sup>823</sup> However, while these words are suitable to describe the way in which civilisation people puff themselves up so as to look down on those in lower social classes such as road sweepers, toilet attendants, domestic servants and porters, they are not really suitable for defining the way in which civilisation people look on social outcasts. For the truth is that you do not need to puff yourself up so as to look with contempt on something you put in a dustbin. All you need to do is to treat it, quite naturally and casually, like dirt.

In our own language there are hosts of words at our disposal to describe anti-civilisation attitudes, which makes it all too easy to identify and denounce the barbarism we encounter in our peers and subordinates. We are even provided with a handful of words to identify and denounce the uncivilised attitudes we recognise in superiors:

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<sup>823</sup> I have also spoken about it as 'marginalisation' but this is an invented word to describe an attitude, and not a particularly telling invention at that.

Hubris, Despising, Arrogant\*, Condescending\*, Haughty\*, Proud\*,  
Disdainful\*, Contemptuous, Patronising\*, Conceited\*, Pompous, Snobbish,  
Puffed up, High and Mightiness\*.

However, an examination shows that in the past most of these words (those marked by an asterisk) signified traits which were deemed to be perfectly honourable when found in true aristocrats. It has only been as a result of the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions that this vocabulary has become generally available for the purpose of identifying and discussing what are taken as being civilisation *defects*. The fact that our language still offers no suitable word to identify and denounce the one attitude which, above all others, the Yahwist was trying to nail, should make us realise what an uphill struggle he must have faced in presenting his ideas. What is more, our instinctive recognition that he was right in placing this unnameable attitude alone at the very top of his list<sup>824</sup> should encourage us to set aside the ridiculous notion that he was a religious freak<sup>825</sup> obsessed with sex and violence and to make the necessary effort to understand his unfamiliar representational techniques.

But won't it be claimed that in practice it is simply not possible to make a hard and fast distinction between this nameless Category One crime and all the others which fall into Category Two? For when a man kills his brother, for example, who is to say that he was not treating him like dirt in doing so? It seems to me that this is an important point which underlines the fact that Category One sins are *always ideological* and, as such, concerned with motives, it being a very particular motive which delineates such sins rather than anything about the acts associated with them. In centrarchal society the Category One sin is treason, which was why in the ancient Near East theft from the palace or temple was punished far more severely than theft from an ordinary citizen.<sup>826</sup> The fact that treason is at bottom a motive rather than an act, rendering it difficult in practice to identify, has always made it hard to prove *but it has never inclined legislators to leave it out of consideration in their codes*. On the contrary, it is the definition of a Category One sin which most deeply characterises any particular code and defines its ideological basis. The basic question which the Yahwist leaves us with, therefore, is this: Are we today right in making treason and the defence of our civilisation the ideological crux for judging wrong behaviour or were the Hebrews right in making it, for want of a better word, marginalization – the very often *casual* dustbinning of people because for any number of reasons they get in the way of our civilised enjoyment of life?

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<sup>824</sup> I maintain that every individual in his heart of hearts recognises this, however deeply he may have buried it.

<sup>825</sup> Or genius depending on one's standpoint.

<sup>826</sup> See above p. 121.

## Chapter 11

### **The Metacosmic: The Hebrews' Ruling Religious Idea**

In the last few chapters we have tried to uncover the Hebrew/god-of-the-marginals ideology<sup>827</sup> as this is found in the Yahwist's texts. In so doing we have at the same time revealed how the priestly writer and his friends attempted to cover up this profoundly uncomfortable, 'revolutionary' worldview by superimposing on it their revisionist notion of god-given dominance, an idea expressly designed to protect and justify their privileged positions as leaders of post-exilic, Judean society. We must now use ideological analysis to examine the religious ideas in the biblical texts to see if they vindicate this understanding.

As I see it such religious ideas fall into three categories. First, there are the very basic religious concepts like prayer and sacrifice which, as it were, go with the territory and as such are commonly found in most if not all religious texts. These, for obvious reasons, we will leave aside. Second, there are the mid-range religious notions, those which, generally speaking, distinguish one religion culturally from another. I identify four of these in the Genesis and Exodus texts: Sabbath observance,<sup>828</sup> food laws,<sup>829</sup> circumcision<sup>830</sup> and the Passover celebration.<sup>831</sup> Finally there are the major theological ideas determining the character of deity and which designate the particular ideological standpoint of the religion in question. Since I do not wish to be accused of finding what I want to find in the biblical texts, yet refuse to confine myself to those anodyne concepts present day academics have decided to use when discussing the Old Testament texts, I have chosen to be guided by a Scottish biblical scholar who wrote at the very beginning of the twentieth century, which is to say before academic scholarship in its search for 'scientific objectivity' had begun in its own way to emasculate the Old Testament of its crucial political faith.<sup>832</sup> In his book on Old Testament Prophecy, published in 1903, A.B. Davidson wrote of 'the general impress which Moses stamped upon the people of Israel at its origins', in these terms:

The main features of this impression were two: that Jehovah was Israel's God alone, and that his being was ethical, demanding a moral life among those who served Him as His people; and these two principles were fused into a high emotional unity in the consciousness of redemption which the people and their leader had just experienced. .... These two principles, that Jehovah alone is God of Israel, and that he is a Being altogether above nature, a moral person, are the principles that have possession of the mind of every prophet in Israel.<sup>833</sup>

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<sup>827</sup> Solidarity with the trashed.

<sup>828</sup> Gen 2.2-3.

<sup>829</sup> Gen 9. 1-5.

<sup>830</sup> Gen 17.9-14.

<sup>831</sup> Ex 12.

<sup>832</sup> Modern biblical historians have rightly decided to put religious faith in its place by excluding faith-talk from their historical discussions. However, they have been monumentally wrong in thinking they are justified in doing the same thing with political faith.

<sup>833</sup> A.B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark: 1903) p. 24ff. Davidson was aware of the conclusions of source criticism and privately accepted many of them. However, for reasons best known to himself he never spoke or wrote about them openly.

Though Davidson speaks of *two* principles it is possible to identify *four* key ideas in what he writes:

1. That Yahweh was above nature. (The *metacosmic* idea)
2. That Yahweh alone was God of Israel. (The *monotheistic* idea<sup>834</sup>)
3. That Yahweh was ethical and demanded a moral life. (The *ethical* idea)
4. That Yahweh's activity was redemptive. (The *strategic* idea)

Accepting this list of major theological ideas (at least provisionally) and not forgetting the four mid-range notions mentioned above, we must now try to discover the extent to which they *depend on* and *are controlled by* the god-of-the-marginals concept.

### *The Metacosmic Idea*

We have already noted that the Hebrews based their mythical stories on those of the surrounding nations and have argued that the only reason they would have had for introducing significant changes would have been to set a new ideological imprint on them.<sup>835</sup> Undeniably the most striking change the biblical writers introduced was that, whereas in normal centrarchal mythical stories<sup>836</sup> deities were depicted as cosmic beings living in the universe as dependants and displaying appetites for the good things it offered (i.e. order, power, food, sex, leisure, comfort and life itself) as well as anxieties about its drawbacks (i.e. competition, insecurity, dearth, disorder, hard work and death) they were clearly at pains to write out such features and to portray their god as having, on the contrary, no needs which the universe could satisfy or fail to satisfy. I call this the metacosmic-god idea and claim that *it has no parallel in the annals of human mythology*. Of course biblical writers do not use the word metacosmic, nor even the more common term transcendent, for that matter.<sup>837</sup> They do not even suggest that their god was *above* or *beyond* cosmological things (Davidson's 'above nature') for these are *our* expressions, which betray our hierarchical thinking. Indeed they offer no single term to identify this metacosmic-god idea. That does not mean that we have mistakenly identified it. It simply means that the idea exists in the text in a different form. Because we are used to juggling with ideas we habitually express our thoughts directly and give them labels,<sup>838</sup> even to the extent of inventing new words when no ready-made ones appear suitable.<sup>839</sup> This was not the way of ancient people. They habitually manifested their ideological convictions and affiliations in the nature and characteristics of their gods and they expressed their ideological thinking by telling

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<sup>834</sup> Claiming that Yahweh alone was God of Israel is not of itself clear evidence for a monotheistic belief which is a much disputed issue, as we shall see in Chapter 11 below. For the moment the label should be taken as simply delineating certain beliefs which eventually crystallised into the idea of monotheism.

<sup>835</sup> See pp. 163 above.

<sup>836</sup> Such as those of the Greeks, Hittites, Persians, Egyptians, Indians and Mesopotamians.

<sup>837</sup> I do not mean to imply that 'transcendent' and 'metacosmic' mean the same thing for, obviously, if I have coined the latter term it is to indicate some difference. However, though I am persuaded that some scholars use the term transcendence to avoid talking about the metacosmic it is difficult to be certain that this is indeed the case. Consequently I am obliged to leave the matter open for the moment. For further discussion of this point see below pp. 254-256.

<sup>838</sup> e.g. hierarchical, egalitarian, cosmological, transcendent, Christian, Jewish, Marxist, Atheist etc.

<sup>839</sup> e.g. metacosmological.



stories about them. So the Hebrews expressed their peculiar, not to say abnormal, metacosmic-god idea, simply by speaking of a god who, though he operated within the universe, experienced no need of it and, as a consequence, had a completely different relationship with the natural order and human beings. As over against the normal cosmic-god notion this mind-blowingly original metacosmic-god idea functioned to set up entirely new parameters for religious questioning. As such it clearly constituted what we have labelled as the ruling religious idea in the Hebrew ideology. – or, if you prefer it, the ruling idea in the Hebrew religion.

*The metacosmic idea as a natural development*

Because we live in a civilisation that has been dominated by the three ‘great’ metacosmic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the metacosmic idea constitutes a natural stage of development in human thought. We may tell ourselves, for instance, that given our experience of the universe as a whole and our propensity to think in terms of cause and effect, it was *natural* that people should eventually come to ask themselves what caused it and hence to postulate that the universe was the handiwork of a metacosmic creator who brought it about *ex nihilo*. However, all the evidence suggests that such a development in human thought came about anything but naturally. It is generally agreed that creation *ex nihilo* is an idea altogether peculiar to the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>840</sup> It cannot therefore be considered a natural development. Indeed, everything suggests that the metacosmic idea, which as we will see eventually came to its logically complete expression in the notion of *ex nihilo* creation, arrived on the historical scene as something of an aberration which could in no way have been anticipated.

*Mesopotamian ideas as non-metacosmological.*

How did this notion of a metacosmic god, above nature and outside time, come about? Otzen seems to suggest there is something like the beginnings of this idea in the way in which mythical stories make reference to an *Urzeit* and an *Endzeit*: a time before history commences and a time after it finishes. As I have already pointed out I believe that he is mistaken (if this is indeed his thinking) for the Mesopotamian mythologies don’t in fact include an *Endzeit*. And when they paint a picture of a time *before* history their purpose is not to establish a godly existence either above and beyond nature or independent of time but rather to concentrate on the existential features of the natural order by excluding the complications produced by the historical process. In other words, in this mythological *Urzeit* nothing more is implied than that the rules of the ordered universe are established ‘before’ (meaning not ‘independently’ but simply ‘so that’) the great game of history can commence. This means that there is absolutely no inkling here of a supra-natural or supra-historical, i.e. metacosmic, existence.

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<sup>840</sup> In classical thought, Christianity alone, or more precisely, the Judeo-Christian tradition, knows the notion of absolute creation. *Creatio ex nihilo* (‘creation out of nothing’) is a dogma of the faith. God has not created starting from something, but starting with what is not, from ‘nothingness’. It is the work of the will of God, and therefore is not co-eternal with God (it has a beginning and will have an end). [www.counterbalance.net/gengloss](http://www.counterbalance.net/gengloss). See also below p. 236.

*Egyptian ideas as non metacosmological.*

Likewise there are no metacosmic features to be found in the worship of the Egyptian sun-god (Amon-Re) or sun-disc (Aton). The portraits of these gods which appear in the beautiful hymns composed to their glory are indeed sublime. However, the fact that the hymn-makers ‘marry’ these gods with a celestial object, the sun, betrays the fact that they envisage them as supreme beings *within* the natural order and suggests that they see them as existing only as far above human mortals as the Pharaoh is above his subjects. That said, it seems to me quite appropriate to speak of these gods in terms of transcendence, for as the Pharaoh’s existence can properly be said to transcend that of his subjects so too Amon-Re’s and Aton’s existences clearly are envisaged as transcending that of humanity.

*Zoroastrian Endzeit as non metacosmological.*

There are, as far as I am aware, no eschatological or end-of-ordinary-time features in the early Mesopotamian or Egyptian religious systems. It would seem therefore that the idea of an *Endzeit* first appears in the Zoroastrian religion. It is impossible to be certain how Zoroaster, an Iranian priest who lived somewhere in the second half of the second millennium BCE,<sup>841</sup> came to conceive of his religious ideas. One thing is certain, however, and that is that he was not motivated by revolutionary considerations for he emphasised the importance of both authority<sup>842</sup> and submissiveness.<sup>843</sup> Indeed, the whole thrust of his work seems to have been aimed at the introduction of a centralising, cultic reform.

As regards the genesis of Zoroaster’s ideas the best hypothesis is that they stemmed from his work as a reforming priest,<sup>844</sup> that it was his everyday performance as a cultic officer which led him to reject the traditional practice of offering sacrifices to all the deities within the Iranian pantheon, regardless of whether they were benign or malevolent. Not that he sought to deny the *existence* of such evil gods and goddesses. It was simply that he was revolted at being expected to countenance their negative and destructive behaviour.

Zoroaster resolved the problem of a universe containing both creative and destructive powers by forcing the traditional religious elements at his disposal into a pattern of dualistic monotheism. He taught that in the beginning there existed two uncreated spirits, Ahura Mazda, the lord of wisdom and the only divine being worthy to be worshipped, and his opposite, negative and malignant twin, Angra Mainyu. These two made a first fatal choice according to their nature, Ahura Mazda to do the best things and Angra Mainyu the worst things, each thereafter creating independent divinities or demons who hypostasised his own spiritual powers, as well as every constituent of the future material creation.<sup>845</sup> Thus, in this ‘First Time’ the whole of creation was already present but only in a singular and spiritual form; in the case of humans there was, for example, only one spiritual being, not many material individuals.

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<sup>841</sup> Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, (Leiden, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1975) p. 190.

<sup>842</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 221.

<sup>843</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 207.

<sup>844</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 220.

<sup>845</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 193.

As yet there was no clash between these two great powers;<sup>846</sup> however, as soon as Ahura Mazda created life and material existence (which Zoroaster conceived of as better than mere spirit<sup>847</sup>) Angra Mainyu immediately entered into it to destroy it by producing the opposite, non-life or evil.<sup>848</sup> Thus began the Time of Mixture which constitutes the present period of struggle between Ahura Mazda and his six divinities on the one hand and Angra Mainyu and his demon powers on the other. In this struggle Man has the possibility of aiding Ahura Mazda, who created him, for though Ahura Mazda is wholly good he is not wholly powerful and therefore needs the sacrifices of the faithful to reinvigorate him for his battle against evil.<sup>849</sup> But at the same time Man also risks being subverted by Angra Mainyu and of becoming an arm in the counter struggle against Ahura Mazda.<sup>850</sup>

These two periods, the First Time and the Time of Mixture, constitute 'limited time' which on coming to an end will see the introduction of the Third Time which is eternity. Here evil will be annihilated and Ahura Mazda's creation restored to its original perfect state, though now in a full material and plural form. There are a number of interesting aspects associated with the coming of this Third Time: the figure of a saviour;<sup>851</sup> a Last Judgement when each person's thoughts, words and deeds will be weighed in scales of hair's breadth precision;<sup>852</sup> bodily resurrection for the just who have died before the hour; salvation and eternal life for the just; damnation and a long age of misery, darkness, bad food, crying and woe for the wicked.<sup>853</sup>

Zoroaster's eschatological teachings were radically new and became formative both within Judaism and Christianity. That said, there is not the slightest sign within them of the metacosmic-god idea. Indeed, though Zoroaster envisaged Ahura Mazda as filling the universe both spiritually and materially it is clear that it never occurred to him to conceive of his god as being in any way outside or independent of it. In fact, even within the universe Zoroaster saw Ahura Mazda as in less than perfect control: that is, as being dependant and as experiencing needs.

*Metacosmic ideas as out of place in centrarchal society.*

So it would seem that neither Mesopotamian *Urzeit* nor Iranian *Endzeit* provided the wherewithal for the genesis of the metacosmic-god idea. If this notion never looked like developing in centrarchal society it seems to me that it was quite simply because centrarchs experienced no ideological need for it; they were naturally happy with the world as it appears to all of us to be: biased in favour of the fit. The officers of the various religions wouldn't have seen anything to be gained from hypothesising a god with supra-natural or metacosmic existence because it was possible to find perfectly

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<sup>846</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 230.

<sup>847</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 230.

<sup>848</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 232.

<sup>849</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>850</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 232.

<sup>851</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 234.

<sup>852</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 237.

<sup>853</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 236-7.

adequate ways of accounting for everything they saw and experienced, from their centrarchical point of view, *within* the confines of the natural order.

*The metacosmic as a development from the god-of-the-marginals concept.*

Jews, Christians and Muslims commonly assume that the metacosmic-god idea constitutes the highest level of spiritual attainment: the cultural summit towards which all civilisations unknowingly progress. The truth, of course, is somewhat more mundane. Historically, the metacosmic-god idea developed as a reaction against centrarchism, which explains why it appeared in marginal Israel and nowhere else, as far as we can tell. As I have said, centrarchical ideas arrange themselves snugly within the ‘cosmic’ order, which is a competitive environment favouring the fit and strong. It is, of course, this close correspondence that gives them their crude power. Israel was perfectly aware of this strength, as can be seen from the Yahwist’s story of the tower of Babel, in which centrarchical beliefs and practices are described as filling the universe and presenting such an unopposable force that Yahweh had to invent mechanisms of control (different languages) to confuse and disperse their power. On the other hand, the god-of-the-marginals ideology appears to fly in the face of the ‘cosmic’ order. A marginal is after all a loser, and nature has a simple way of dealing with such creatures - she discards them without a tear or a backward glance. Thus, in attempting to curb those who should naturally have exercised power (the winners) and sharing out power amongst those who should not normally have exercised it (the losers) Israel was an affront to nature and the cosmos. Isaiah voices his awareness of this basic contradiction when he depicts a strikingly *unnatural* vision of the community’s perfect future:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall feed;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.<sup>854</sup>

In short, when Israel took up the utterly mind-blowing god-of-the-marginals notion it was not just in opposition to the centrachs but, more significantly, in the teeth of the natural order. This being the case, there simply was no place for Yahweh *within the natural order* alongside the other cosmological gods. Is it surprising, therefore, that when she defiantly declared, against the empirical, cosmic evidence, that her marginals’ god was for real, she did so by depicting him as altogether *beyond the bounds of nature*, in the sense of being without appetites the universe could satisfy and anxieties it could allay? In this way, against all odds, the metacosmic-god idea was born and civilisation, with its all too obvious survival-of-the-fittest assumptions, is still attempting to recover from the effect.<sup>855</sup>

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<sup>854</sup> Is 11. 6-9. See also Is 65:17-25.

<sup>855</sup> Personally, of course, I hope it never will recover!

*The metacosmic as seen in the prohibition of images*

One of the clearest consequences of the metacosmic-god concept was Israel's traditional prohibition of images.<sup>856</sup> We have to be a little bit careful in dealing with this matter because the modern scientific mind has an inherent difficulty in understanding the significance of idols. It can't help but look at them from its own enlightenment standpoint, where everything is seen as revolving around the question whether the deity is real or not. Consequently, the scientific mind tends to see an idol as a rather crude and primitive attempt to render real and visible that which in fact is just invented and imaginary.<sup>857</sup> This whole construct is, of course, absurd since in the ancient world the reality of divinity was taken for granted and no one experienced the slightest need to be reassured about the existence of his or her god or gods. Properly understood, idols should be seen as yet another creation of the representational mind. As the ancients used *verbal* representations to make it possible to speak about matters they could not otherwise have discussed, so they made *visual* representations to be able to indulge in behavioural communication. Consequently, the Yahwist's prohibition of idols should not be seen as a cultural advance beyond primitive superstition. Rather it should be seen in ideological terms. *As a metacosmic 'reality'*<sup>858</sup> *justifying the Hebrews' vital interests as marginals Yahweh manifestly could not be subjected to cosmological representation. Even his name had to be left unpronounced.*

*Scholarships ignorance of the metacosmic*

What explanation has biblical scholarship, for its part, given for the historical appearance of this extraordinary and aberrational idea? It is not easy to discuss this matter since, surprisingly enough, modern scholarship has yet to recognise clearly the existence of the metacosmic god in the Bible. This means that even Christian scholars have only ever talked about the phenomenon obliquely, when referring to the supposed characteristics which made biblical religion somehow unique. In the first part of the last century Christian scholars<sup>859</sup> generally assumed that biblical religious thinking was significantly different, the only problem being to identify what made the difference. Nowadays this is no longer the case, making it not uncommon to find scholars arguing that the differences are in fact relatively unimportant.<sup>860</sup> Though I believe I understand the reasons for this change in perception it seems to me a retrograde step. To my mind, saying that the Bible is much on a par with other ancient Near Eastern literature is like pretending that there is no significant difference between the plays of Shakespeare and those of other Elizabethan playwrights. It constitutes an incredibly annoying backward step since it takes one away from the only important issue which, it is true, past biblical

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<sup>856</sup> 'Yahwism was aniconic; representations of the deity were strictly forbidden.' John Bright, *History*, p. 140. See Exod 20:4.

<sup>857</sup> See, for example, Bright's rather curious phrase that in paganism 'the image of the god represented his visible presence' *History*, p. 140. It is true, of course, that the image represented the god, but untrue that it represented the god's visible presence since a visible presence requires no representation. Perhaps what Bright means is that the image represented the god's reality but this too is untrue for the worshiper needed no confirmation of the reality of his god.

<sup>858</sup> I call it a reality because in the ideological realm created by consciousness it is perfectly real. Whether it is real in any deeper sense is, of course, open to question, which is why I have used inverted commas.

<sup>859</sup> e.g. Von Rad, John Bright, George E. Wright: scholars now loosely referred to as Maximalists.

<sup>860</sup> e.g. Philip Davies and the so called Minimalists.

scholarship miserably failed to resolve, viz. what is it that makes the all too obvious difference?

It was, of course, often argued that biblical religion was unique, the suggestion being that this was due to the fact that it contained the special revelations of the one true God. However, what it actually was that made biblical religion unique was never clearly established and, of course, biblical religion's status as 'revelation' did not facilitate the task of pinning the matter down. It was also commonly said that biblical religious thought was different from and superior to that found in the rest of the ancient Near East, in that it viewed creation as a spiritual matter in which a distant and unknowable, transcendent God was conceived as creating simply by word of mouth. The trouble with such an approach was not simply that, as a typically scholarly construct, it was prejudiced in entirely the wrong direction – seeing Yahweh as a high and mighty establishment god rather than as the metacosmic god of the marginals – but also that it was demonstrably false. It is certainly true to say that the revisionist god of Genesis 1 creates largely if not uniquely by word of mouth and it could just possibly be claimed that his character is transcendent (though I would personally argue that this is a far from adequate description). However, neither of these things is in the slightest bit true of the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' god of Genesis 2 onwards, for he creates manually and functions decidedly immanently: walking about on earth and chatting with humans. What is more, though Mesopotamian and Egyptian gods are generally described as creating manually (by spitting, moulding or masturbation) some of them (e.g. Ra and Ptah) are also described as creating just by word of mouth.<sup>861</sup>

#### *Creation ex nihilo used to create confusion*

In the past a rather more serious attempt to identify the uniqueness of biblical thought focused on the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. It is generally agreed that, whereas in the rest of the ancient world creation was viewed as a matter of bringing order to a pre-existing chaotic environment, within the Judeo-Christian tradition it uniquely came to be seen as the act of *bringing something out of nothing*. However, though this difference seems pretty clear, the trouble has always been to establish exactly when the conceptual breakthrough took place. As James Patrick Holding points out the difficulty lies within the concept itself:

The problem with finding the doctrine of *ex nihilo* unambiguously formulated is that the concept of "nothing" is very difficult to quantify. Just as some societies took a long time coming up with a symbol for zero, so it seems Jewish and Christian thinkers took some time trying to quantify *ex nihilo*. Even in modern language, "made out of nothing" is often said as though "nothing" were a "thing" that things can be made out of. A person who is asked to think of nothing will not be able to actually do so: they will generally think of a blank background, which is actually something.<sup>862</sup>

Because of the intrinsic difficulty of clearly diagnosing the presence of the concept in ancient texts, opinions continue to differ widely as to when the notion of creation out of nothing actually surfaced. Few scholars now isolate it within the Jewish Bible itself. However some have claimed to identify it in intertestamental literature. Others find it in

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<sup>861</sup> See ANET pp. 4-5.

<sup>862</sup> James Patrick Holding, *Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: An Examination of Creation Ex Nihilo* [www.tektonic.org/JPH\\_NVNG.html](http://www.tektonic.org/JPH_NVNG.html).

the New Testament while others still claim that it can only properly be identified in much later Christian writings against Gnosticism and Platonism.<sup>863</sup> This ongoing controversy, fuelled by the Mormons whose credibility as non-believers in *ex nihilo* creation is at stake, instead of highlighting the metacosmic-god idea in the Bible has both muddied the water and effectively drawn attention away from it. For instead of seeing creation *ex nihilo* as simply the final logical expression of the idea of the metacosmic god, who is already perfectly evident in the biblical texts, the birth of the idea has instead been sought for within these second-century philosophical disputes.<sup>864</sup> This has meant that even those who clearly see creation *ex nihilo* as implicit in the book of Genesis signally fail to identify god-of-the-marginals idea that engendered it:

One may perhaps argue justly that there is nothing in the Bible that indicates a belief in creation *ex nihilo*, but one will assuredly not find the teaching that matter is eternal. Where the Bible is silent or ambiguous, there is no fault in applying universal principles and logic, and these principles – which are not merely the province of Hellenism – lead to the conclusion of *ex nihilo* creation.<sup>865</sup>

... the doctrine of creation out of nothing was not simply created *ex nihilo* by post-biblical theologians of the second century to counteract gnostic ideas. We have good reason to believe that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is rooted in biblical passages indicating that God is the ontological originator of all that exists.<sup>866</sup>

### *Confusion used to hide ignorance*

As a result of this regrettable state of confusion it has become possible in recent years for scholars to pretend they have adequately encompassed biblical thought even while demonstrating just how little of it they truly understand. For example, by cleverly juggling his cards T. L. Thompson has been able to account for both immanence and transcendence in biblical thinking<sup>867</sup> without feeling in the least bit obliged to explain its equally obvious yet vastly more important ‘above nature’ or metacosmic features, which is to say Yahweh’s lack of dependence on the universe expressed in appetites and anxieties. In this way, by the simple expedient of ignoring what makes biblical thinking altogether unique, Thompson manages to conclude that there was little special about biblical religious thought. Its transcendent ‘high god’, who served simply to

<sup>863</sup> ‘Genesis portrays the creation of order from chaos, and ... the *ex nihilo* doctrine was formulated later by the church fathers to defend theism against an ultimate dualism or a monistic pantheism.’ I. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (The Gifford Lectures 1989/1991, vol. 1; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 144.

<sup>864</sup> See G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); originally published as *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978). May argues that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged during the latter part of the second century in controversies with Gnosticism and Middle Platonism, in order to "express and safeguard the omnipotence and freedom of God acting in history".

<sup>865</sup> James Patrick Holding Conclusion of his article *Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: An Examination of Creation Ex Nihilo* found on [www.tektonics.org/JPH\\_NVNG.html](http://www.tektonics.org/JPH_NVNG.html)

<sup>866</sup> Paul Copan *Is Creatio Ex Nihilo A Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination Of Gerhard May's Proposal* Trinity Journal 17.1 (Spring 1996) pp 77–93.

<sup>867</sup> As Thompson sees it, Elohim is the name for the ‘high God’ in Israel. Like other ‘high gods’ in the ancient world he is spiritual, impersonal and operates transcendently beyond human understanding, pronouncing arbitrarily on what is right and wrong. Yahweh, on the other hand, whose job as Emmanuel (God with us) is to reveal the ‘high God’ Elohim to Israel, functions, for his part, personally and immanently. Thus, by holding Elohim and Yahweh together in tension, transcendence and immanence are combined in biblical thought, so Thompson maintains. See Thompson, *Bible* pp 243-301.

dispense irrefutable truths favoured by the priestly, administrative centrachs, operated, as he sees it, pretty much on a par with all the other 'high gods' in the ancient world. I can't help thinking that such an argumentation constitutes an act of wilful blindness.

*The metacosmic and the transcendent mean different things*

It is important at this point to clarify the distinction I make between a transcendent and a metacosmic god. With Thompson I see all of the ancient 'high gods'<sup>868</sup> as characteristically transcendent and I am happy for the moment to go along with his argument that such deities were the creations of the empires which had sprung up all over the ancient world; the intention of those creating them being to replace the personal, homely and immanent traditional gods of the conquered peoples with something more suitable to the new 'global' environment. So, just as the 'high king' was seen as an unknowable being who knew everything, enabling him to dispense irrefutable justice from his distant location, so the 'high god', his father, was also seen as an unknowable, transcendent and spiritual being who, knowing all things, promulgated the irrefutable standards of right and wrong behaviour on which the empire depended. Following Thompson it would seem that such transcendent gods in the ancient Near East were two-a-penny, as common as the empires which spawned them. However, as I see it this was not the case with the metacosmic god who, as the product of marginal Israel, was unique and stood alone. In the first place, Yahweh as metacosmic god of the marginals was characteristically immanent and personal, just as we find him in Genesis 2. However, in the hands of the priestly revisionists he lost his immanent characteristic to become the metacosmic yet transcendent figure found in Genesis 1 who constitutes a rather superior 'high god' not to be confused with his needful rivals. This later revisionist Yahweh, in taking on the function of authorising domination, has clearly lost his defining ideological characteristic of solidarity with the outcasts. However, he still retains his metacosmic feature of needless independence since this actually enhances his new-found stature as a transcendent deity. Indeed, as a metacosmic 'high god' he has every appearance of being even more high and mighty than the other normal high gods! In this way, as I have already pointed out, in classical biblical revisionism the god-of-the-marginals idea is abandoned and the metacosmic god exalted.

It is important to realise that all of this takes place not by making up new words and definitions but simply by a process of story-telling. Because of this it is possible, even if not sensible, to pick holes in the Yahwist's construction. Thus, for example, it must surely have come to be realised that, in talking about Yahweh immanently, as walking about like any inhabitant of the universe, the Yahwist inadvertently undermined his metacosmic thesis since, *logically*, a certain degree of dependence on the universe is exhibited simply by the fact of inhabiting it. This is surely the sort of thinking which eventually led writers in the Judeo-Christian tradition to try to guarantee the logic of the metacosmic understanding by speaking about *ex nihilo* creation. However, the trouble was that nothing is truly capable of guaranteeing the Bible's metacosmic understanding apart from its ideological god-of-the-marginals underpinning.

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<sup>868</sup> *Ahura Mazda* in Persia, *Marduk* in Babylon, *Sin* in Harran, and *Baal Shamen* in Syria. To this list I would add the Egyptian gods *Atum-Re*, *Amon-Re* and *Aton* though Thompson does not mention them.



### *The Mid-Range Religious Notions*

With the metacosmic-god idea's derivation from the god-of-the-marginals concept substantiated, we now need to ask ourselves whether this is also true of the mid-range religious notions of *Sabbath observance*, *Circumcision*, *food laws* and *Passover celebration*? It is noticeable that in Genesis it is the priestly writer, not the Yahwist, who seeks to make something of these religious constructs. This would seem to militate against such a derivation. In the case of circumcision I can find nothing whatsoever which connects it to the god-of-the-marginals idea. Indeed, as far as we know, circumcision was generally practiced amongst the Semitic peoples of the ancient Near East which, of course, is why the Philistines, as non-Semitic incomers, attracted the 'uncircumcised' label in the book of Judges.<sup>869</sup> Sabbath observance and the food laws, on the other hand were peculiar to Israel and certainly became signs that marked her out from other nations. Sabbath observance limited work for profit and institutionalised the notion of rest. As such it was clearly a civilisation construct, designed to restrain human greed and every form of harmful over-exploitation of the means of production, and there is no doubting that it has had an enormously civilising influence in western society, helping to sanitise working relationships for thousands of years. However, as a civilisation concept it cannot be argued that it stems from the god-of-the-marginals idea, even though it could be said that it sits more comfortably with this ideology than it does with the centrarchival ideologies of the ancient Near East.

Passover presents us with a slightly more complicated picture, for while it is certainly true that the priestly writer places far more emphasis on the central importance of this feast than the Yahwist does – in his eyes its faithful celebration brings about, of itself, Israel's deliverance – the feast none the less also figures in the Yahwist's text, at least as this is substantiated by literary criticism. However, as we have noted in Chapter 6, there is evidence of two strands in the Exodus tradition. The first places primary focus upon God's intervention as the means of Israel's liberation, Moses and Aaron simply facilitating the event. Here, Pharaoh drives Israel out of the land as a direct result of the plagues which climax in Israel's faithful celebration of the Passover and God's slaying of the Egyptian first-born. The second strand, which George W. Coats describes as the 'escape in haste' tradition, 'combines divine intervention with the heroic stature of Moses. Moses calls his people to leave under his leadership, without the permission or even the knowledge of the Pharaoh.' It is of course this older, 'revolutionary' partnership tradition which I associate with the Yahwist and here the Passover does not figure.<sup>870</sup> I conclude therefore that, in sharp contrast with the metacosmic-god idea itself, *none* of these mid-range religious notions can properly be said to stem from the god-of-the-marginals idea, this being unsurprising because everything indicates that they were civilisation ideas introduced by P and his friends.

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<sup>869</sup> E.g. Judges 14.3.

<sup>870</sup> See p. 131 note 443. above.



## Chapter 12

### The Monotheism Idea

Our general thesis is that the Genesis-Exodus text came about as a result of a revolution/revisionism process. That is to say, first a ‘revolutionary’ document containing the Hebrew ideology of *radical solidarity* was produced. This was then, at some later date, progressively edited and added to in order to superimpose on it a revisionist ideology of *god-ordained dominance*. In this way the idea of the metacosmic god-of-the-marginals notion was effectively replaced by the metacosmic-god idea standing alone. We have established the underlying presence of the god-of-the-marginals notion in these texts and have shown it to be the ruling political idea in what we have called the Hebrew ideology. We are now in the process of studying the religious ideas contained in these texts to see if they can be easily fitted into this revolution/revisionism picture and confirm it. At the end of the last chapter we came to the conclusion that the mid-range religious constructs of Sabbath observance, circumcision, food laws and Passover celebration were in no obvious way dependent on the Hebrew god-of-the-marginals notion. This, however, was unsurprising considering that these ideas were all found in passages in the text attributed by source criticism to the priestly writer. On the other hand the metacosmic-god idea, which clearly constituted the ruling religious idea in the Yahwist’s ‘revolutionary’ document, could only be satisfactorily explained as a dependent notion, as a necessary adjunct of the god-of-the-marginals idea. What we now have to do in this present chapter is to see how *Monotheism* – the third major theological idea in Mosaic Yahwism as identified by our chosen guide A. B. Davidson – fits into this revolution/revisionism picture.

#### *Is Monotheism the Summit of Religious Achievement?*

When it comes to the idea of monotheism the first thing to note is that we are once again dealing with a word that does not actually appear in the biblical texts since it is a Greek, analytical term, not a Hebrew, descriptive one. Indeed even the notion itself is not consistently present in the texts for there are more biblical passages which testify to a belief in a plurality of gods than there are those which, by rubbishing all gods bar one, witness clearly to a singular belief. In fact, the relatively few explicit declarations of the monotheism idea all occur in what purport to be late exilic or post-exilic texts. This led a number of biblical scholars in the nineteenth century to argue that in abandoning her former pagan practices in favour of the worship of the one true god Israel had made a notable cultural breakthrough.<sup>871</sup> I call this general scheme, in which religion is seen as

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<sup>871</sup> ‘... how far can the study of the environment of Israel .. be used to explain the faith of Israel? Specifically, has the God of Israel evolved from the gods of the nations, or Israel’s monotheism from pagan polytheism? During the past century our preoccupation with the idea of development has led us to answer this last question in the affirmative. The patriarchal narratives have been deciphered in such a way as to reveal an animism or polydemonism. The nature of this religion was assumed to be explained by the type of comparative material collected by Sir James Frazer in his *Golden Bough*. From animism Israel was thought to have evolved through polytheism and henotheism to monotheism.’ G. E. Wright, *Old* p. 12.

progressing through successive stages of development to increasingly higher levels of cultural sophistication till it arrives at a peak in monotheism, the *cultural achievement model*.<sup>872</sup>

#### The Cultural Achievement Model.

Primitive animism creates the mythological superstructure which leads in time to the development of full-blown polytheism. As polytheism becomes increasingly structured a pantheon develops, run by an inner, ruling circle of gods. In the course of time the father-figure thrown up by this inner circle eventually takes over the functions of all the deities, who consequently disappear, leading to the development of monotheism as the summit of religious achievement.

It was natural that this model, consisting of a series of progressive developments, should have appealed to people in the nineteenth century, given that the idea of progress was then all the rage. However, there have always been good reasons for querying it: Of all the communities in the ancient Near East Israel was the least noted for her cultural achievements and there are no signs that she aspired to be culturally progressive. However, in order to make an informed judgement about this model ourselves we will need to look more closely at what is meant by this word ‘achievement’, given its inherent ambiguity. There are, as I see it, three ways in which the term is used:

1. In the first place there is achievement in terms of *performance* where the word indicates a step up to a higher level of operation, often as a result of a new technological development (e.g. stone age → bronze age → iron age). Here, achievement is something which is *measurable* on a universally accepted scale. This makes it possible to ascertain whether a given stage is advanced or primitive. However, because achievement is measured in this way it can never be claimed that the present stage constitutes the summit since it can always be argued that it is merely the prelude to some as yet unimagined future development.
2. Then there is achievement in terms of *value* where the word implies that the new situation is viewed, by the observer at least, as a step in some ideologically defined, advantageous direction (e.g. the political change which brought in the post-war Atlee government in Britain). Here achievement, though measurable, is purely *a matter of judgement* since there exists no universal agreement about what constitutes the right direction of advance. This means that a primitive situation may well be deemed to have been more advanced than a modern one. Because of this, measurement is classically made in terms of a swing either to

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<sup>872</sup> e.g. AB Davidson: ‘Perhaps too much stress may be laid, particularly in the early times of simple thought, on abstract monotheism. ... Even the polytheism of the heathen sometimes came practically very near monotheism. Worshipers usually devoted themselves to one out of the many gods known in their country; they usually, therefore, thought of him as God alone, and gradually assigned to him all the distinctive attributes of other deities, and therefore virtually, of deity.’ Wright, *Old* pp. 24-5. See also Bright: ‘Tendencies in a monarchical, even monotheistic, direction were abroad, and in one case (the Aten cult) a religion at least bordering on monotheism had emerged.’ Bright, *History*, pp. 145-6 [129f].

the left or to the right. With this *value* rationale, of course, it makes no sense to speak of a summit of achievement except in eschatological terms since everything which is said to have been ‘gained’ can easily be ‘lost’ and vice versa.

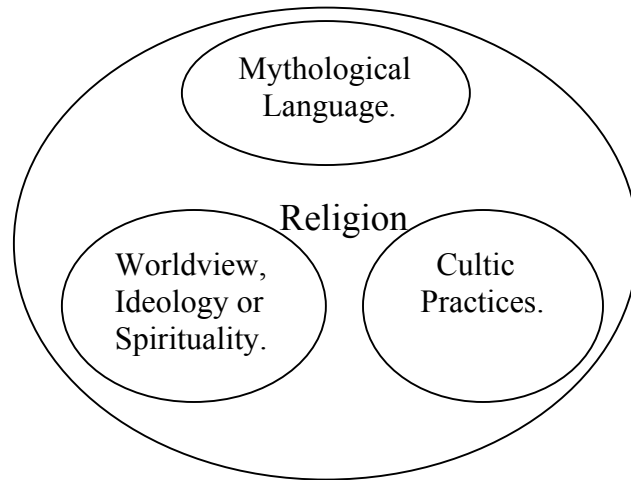
3. Finally there is achievement in terms of *liberation* where the word indicates that some progress has been made in removing a restriction to human welfare (e.g. Marx’s contention that civilisation introduced into human society class divisions and contradictions between class interests, which naturally deconstruct in progressive stages until the point at which a classless society finally evolves). Here, achievement is clearly measurable on a scientific scale. What is more there also exists, in theory at least, a natural end point and summit of achievement when the contradiction which has been restricting human welfare is, finally removed.

The important thing to realise about these different sorts of achievement is that they all are supported by completely different and, indeed, incompatible rationales. The fact that they all employ the same words (achievement, development, progress, advance etc), therefore, is an open invitation to confusion. This can be clearly seen in the above *cultural achievement model*. Here we find the aspect of ‘progress’, meaning ‘breakthrough’, taken from the *performance* rationale as well as the aspect of ‘a summit of achievement’ taken from the *liberation* rationale. Over and above this we also find the aspect of ideology sneaked in unavowed (remember, we are talking about monotheism) without in any way admitting its *value* rationale because, of course, the whole point of the exercise is to give the impression that what is being talked about is a measurable advance! In fact this *cultural achievement model* is nothing but a monstrous fraud: a completely unworkable hybrid built from selected characteristics taken from different working models, regardless of their incompatible rationales. It has only remained undetected so long because biblical scholarship has been incredibly slow in providing itself with the analytical tools which make it possible to detect the difference between ideological and non-ideological matters.

### *Analytical Language as the Summit of Religious Achievement*

So let us for the moment confine ourselves strictly to the rationale of *liberation* where the idea of a summit of achievement is germane and pose once again the question concerning the summit of *religious* achievement. As soon as we start to examine this matter we find ourselves faced with a problem. To speak in any way meaningfully about *religious development* we need to be clear what religion is and this is not a straightforward matter. In Marx’s case he had no difficulty since he was talking about *social development* and everyone knew what society was, even though one form of it may have been very different from another. The difficulty with the word religion is that it is commonly used to cover at least three quite different, though intimately related, activities. For as social animals humans experience a profound desire to understand the position they occupy within their family, community, world and universe. They also naturally seek to express the awareness they come by in some sort of communal celebration. However, to make this understanding and articulation

possible it is first necessary to invent a *language* within which such matters can be discussed. But as soon as this language is devised it itself affects both the way in which people *think about* their predicament and the way in which they *celebrate* the awareness achieved. As far as our own civilisation is concerned the language designed for discussing the human predicament was myth, and the word religion came to be used to cover not just 1) *the use of this mythological language* itself but also 2) *the worldview* thereby achieved and 3) *the cultic, celebratory activities* which developed as a result.<sup>873</sup>



However, since we are at the moment strictly confining ourselves to the rationale of *liberation* it is clear that our concern has to be solely with religion understood as mythological language, forgetting both ideological considerations and cultic practices. Using the word in this narrow sense, the ‘religions’ of the Ancient Near East were at bottom just complex representational schemes enabling people to talk meaningfully about the forces people experienced in their lives, given that they did not have the necessary analytical tools for examining and discussing these phenomena directly, using abstract and scientific thought-forms and expressions as we do. As we have already pointed out, if we judge such ancient schemes purely linguistically (forgetting for the moment their spiritual/ideological merit or lack of it) we find that they operated fairly successfully but with one major drawback: the fact that they inadvertently opened the door to absurd superstitious beliefs. This absurdity was only finally eradicated, and the door closed to superstition, with the advent of analytical language. On this understanding, the terminal point of the ‘religious’ process which was set in motion by the introduction of mythological language, was clearly the advent of the analytical approach, which made it possible for people to discuss their situations without at the same time leading one another into superstition.

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<sup>873</sup> To this could also possibly be added a fourth, psychological, dimension indicating what is presumably either a genetic or culturally imposed mental disposition which causes some people to be naturally, religiously inclined and others less so or even not at all.

### The Linguistic Achievement Model.

The religious process begins with the creation of the mythological superstructure as a language for discussing the unseen forces people experienced in their lives. Unfortunately, the mythological superstructure, with its personalisations, inadvertently lets loose on the world the absurdity of superstition. From then on, through the course of time, superstition naturally deconstructs by a process of resolving contradictions till it finally disappears as a creditable recourse with the advent of the analytical approach: the terminal stage as far as religious language is concerned.

### *What in Fact Produced Monotheism?*

Having got that matter out of the way we can now ask ourselves a further question. If monotheism is not the natural end-point of religious development, as was commonly assumed in the past, how did it in fact come about?

#### *The impact of centrism on cosmological religions.*

There is in fact no good evidence to suggest that polytheism naturally evolves into monotheism.<sup>874</sup> That said, there are certainly signs of a process of development within ancient religions. Let us return to our basic premise: that the purpose of religion in the ancient Near East was to enable people to achieve a mental grasp of their situation by patterning the evident *multiplicity* of unseen forces experienced in the universe into a convincing and satisfying pantheonic whole. Of course, some of the religions we know about from this part of the ancient world are a great deal more complex than this simple picture would suggest. For, clearly, civilization's centrarchal forces had also been at work in this patterning process. This resulted in an additional unifying impulse towards a centre, with the appearance within the pantheon of a small ruling elite sometimes led by a military supremo.<sup>875</sup> Further to this, the uniform character of the pantheon changed. One must suppose that in the first instance it was composed of godly representatives of the commonly experienced *natural forces*. Now, however, a new set of gods came to be included, representing *human social factors* such as the military rulers, the priestly administrators, the farmers, the shepherds, the migrants and so on.<sup>876</sup>

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<sup>874</sup> See W.F. Albright 'There can no longer be any doubt that Fr. Schmidt has successfully disproved the simple evolutionary progression first set up by the positivist Compt, fetishism-polytheism-monotheism, or Taylor's animism-polytheism-monotheism. Nor can Marett's correction to pre-animism-(dynamism)-animism-polytheism-monotheism escape radical modification.' *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946) p. 125.

<sup>875</sup> This was not always the case. In the Sumerian civilization, for example, Enlil was the military supremo but An was the father of the gods and as such he represented the mythological superstructure as a whole. This reflects the complexity of the Sumerian civilization which was a collection of semi-independent cities, one of which, at any given time, found itself in the ascendancy.

<sup>876</sup> In the case of the Sumerian administrators, instead of inventing a new god to represent them they took *Enki* the immensely important god of fresh water and wisdom and made him their own.

*The Zoroastrian way to monotheism.*

In this regard it is interesting to note that the Zoroastrian brand of monotheism clearly developed within a primitive<sup>877</sup> tribal tradition. For in the Indo-Iranian religion there are no signs of an underlying, structured pantheon built on class stratification. We cannot be sure what caused Zoroaster to make the changes which he did to the Iranian tradition he inherited. However, it is certain he was no revolutionary since his reforming ideas included no hint of a redistribution of power.<sup>878</sup> It seems most likely that his purpose was to establish cultic reform: that an unusually high moral stance had led him to reject the common practice of making sacrifices to all the gods, including those who displayed characteristics inimical to human well-being; and that it was this refusal which engendered in him a desire to give the tradition's disparate, polytheistic jungle a unified moral form which he could more satisfactorily cope with. This would explain why he was eventually led to postulate the existence of an underlying dualistic unity within the created order, with a single good god destined in time to defeat his evil counterpart and rid the universe of evil's unwanted presence. This being the case, the ideology driving these reforms in Iran in the second half of the second millennium BCE should be seen as an elitist, administrative and cultural centralisation very similar to the one which took place in Israel under the returning exiles – except that the reforms in Israel in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE exhibited a strong revisionist colouring, witnessing to the fact the priesthood, for their part, were building on a 'revolutionary' tradition now weakened by the course of events.

*The Egyptian way to monotheism.*

In sharp contrast with the Iranian situation, Egyptian monotheistic ideas were most definitely the product of a sophisticated, centrarchal civilisation. These notions are already apparent in some of the early hymns to the sun god Amon-Re<sup>879</sup> and this development itself was clearly, in part at least, the result of centrarchal pressure: the desire of the Egyptian rulers to unify the wide empire which was now governed under their central control.<sup>880</sup> However, though the supporters of Amon-Re made every attempt to portray the universal pre-eminence and self sufficiency of their deity, they never made any move to deny the value of the other gods or to attack their cults.<sup>881</sup> It was not until the El-Amarna revolution (1377-1370 BCE) that the crucial move towards monotheism occurred and the pharaoh Amenophis IV not only vigorously promoted the relatively minor cult of the Aten (solar-disc), placing it centre stage, but at the same time proceeded to suppress all the other Egyptian cults (especially that of Amon-Re) declaring Aten to be a jealous god who would not tolerate any other worship or figure of divinity.<sup>882</sup>

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<sup>877</sup> I intend no pejorative inferences by using this word. All I mean to imply is a lack of civilizational influence.

<sup>878</sup> See p. 236 above.

<sup>879</sup> See *ANET* pp.

<sup>880</sup> 'Egypt's world position under her empire produced strong tendencies towards centralization and unification of Egyptian religion, with universalism and with syncretism of the gods.' *ANET* p.365.

<sup>881</sup> '...the supporters of Re, although seeking pre-eminence amongst other deities, had never claimed that the people should pay their god exclusive homage.' A. Rosalie David *The Ancient Egyptians; religious Beliefs and Practices*. (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) p.157.

<sup>882</sup> James Hastings *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 1912) p. 248. See also Donald B. Redford: 'Seven years after Akhenaten had come to the throne, the



Our awareness of the El-Amarna revolution is quite fortuitous (and recent) for immediately after Amenophis' death a counter revolution took place and all records of his reign, including the new city he had built for himself and his court, were systematically destroyed. It wasn't till 1891 that his extraordinary doings started to come to light, when the archaeological excavations at Tel el-Amarna uncovered the ruins of his capital Akhenaten (the horizon of Aten). At first there was little data to work on and in their preliminary studies historians tended to portray Amenophis IV according to their Christian lights, as a far-sighted ruler whose solar monotheism had come to him as a revealed truth! It was only when considerably more facts appeared that the mundane truth became apparent.

It is now realised that behind the El-Amarna revolution lay a long struggle between the monarchy and the priestly aristocracy whose influence had been established around the traditional Amon-Re cult. In the early years of the Old Kingdom the pharaoh of Egypt had behaved as an absolute monarch. However, in time the priestly aristocrats exerted their influence to curtail the monarch's power, thus providing themselves with the space within which to increase their own authority. In the reign of Amenophis' grandfather Tuthmosis IV we come across what may well be signs of the monarchy's concerted attempt to re-establish its ascendancy. In the first place the Aten cult was created as what seems to have been a monarchical alternative to the cult of Amon-Re, for though we already know of this Aten in texts from the Middle Kingdom, it was only during Tuthmosis' reign that the god became distinguished from Re and a cult dedicated to him was established in its own right.<sup>883</sup> In the second place, the traditional marriage practice brokered by the aristocratic priests of Amon-Re was abandoned. In this the new pharaoh had been expected to take as his chief wife (and mother to the next pharaoh) the female heir - which in reality meant one of his sisters. This practice had enhanced the power of the priests of Amon-Re since their patronage was necessary for designating the royal successor, a fact which effectively ensured their influence over the queen-to-be and therefore of the next pharaoh. Consequently, Tuthmosis' decision to take a foreign princess as his chief wife brought about a considerable weakening in their influence. It is significant that Tuthmosis's son, Amenophis III reinforced both of these important changes by taking the daughter of Egyptian commoners as his chief wife and by actively promoting the cult of Aten. However, there is no evidence that he made any move to exclude the cult of Amon-Re or that of any of the other Egyptian deities.

Given this background, it is now all too apparent that the extraordinary actions of Amenophis IV – in expunging the names of all the Egyptian gods from off their monuments, in closing their temples, in disbanding their priesthoods, in diverting their revenues in favour of the Aten cult, and in promulgating the exclusive worship of Aten in which all priestly mediatorial activity was concentrated in himself as the monarch – should not be seen as the idiosyncratic behaviour of an extraordinary individual in possession of divine revelation. Rather, it should be understood as the logical

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integrated system of politics, economics, and cult that Egypt had known for seventeen centuries had been drastically modified, if not turned upside down.' *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984) p. 153.

<sup>883</sup> David, *Ancient*, p.157.

culmination of the monarchy's long ideological struggle with the Amon-Re priests and of its concerted attempts over the years to re-establish its dominance.<sup>884</sup>

From these two examples alone it is possible to conclude that, though monotheism *can* arise out of structured polytheism as a result of centrarchal pressure, the movement can just as easily be in the other direction, as when it 'naturally'<sup>885</sup> reverts to its former state. What is more, monotheism can arise even before social forces have had time to prepare the ground, purely as a result of a high-minded priestly concern for morality and conformity in the cultic practices. With these important lessons in mind we will now try to determine what was the critical factor in the development of monotheism in Israel.

*The Hebrew way to monotheism according to Thompson.*

Thomas Thompson identifies not one but two monotheisms in the biblical texts: an *exclusive* and an *inclusive* type.

1). Exclusive biblical monotheism

Thompson characterises exclusive biblical monotheism as *universalistic, intolerant and discriminating*. He finds the notion first and foremost in the work of the Psalmist; as for example in the emphatic distinction between, on the one hand, the way of the righteous and, on the other, the way of the wicked or, alternatively, in the metaphors of warfare between, on the one side, Yahweh and his messiah, and on the other, the nations and the powers of the ungodly. However, Thompson also sees exclusive monotheism in the sectarian attitudes found in many of the later Dead Sea scrolls, as well as in the stories about forced conversions in Josephus's accounts of the Maccabean conquest of Palestine. He envisages the idea as arising, at least in part, as a result of the development of such sectarian attitudes, though he also tentatively suggests that 'perhaps the original Greek concept of the essential spirituality and individuality of the human person found a platform in Asia in which the gods, perceived as individuals, became implicitly competitive.' Whatever the case may be, Thompson sees exclusive monotheism as a secondary development which came about in reaction to Greek domination and the increasing spread of its mercantile syncretism and penchant for a plurality of religious expression. As he writes: 'The need to reject the dominance of the Seleucids defined itself as a need to affirm monotheism in *exclusive and anti-Hellenistic* terms.'<sup>886</sup>

2). Inclusive biblical monotheism

Thompson characterises inclusive biblical monotheism as *transcendent, universal, and pluralistic*. God is seen as *life* and *spirit* and thus as transcendent in the sense of being *unknowable* and *ineffable*, making all human descriptions of him *limited* and so

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<sup>884</sup> 'Ake-en-Aten was not, however, simply a mystic or a visionary - his aims were also political. He wanted to free Egypt from the power of the priests of Amon and to unite the empire by providing a form of worship which all his subjects would accept.' de Vaux, *Early*, p. 101.

<sup>885</sup> I employ the word ironically since I believe, of course, there is no *natural* development between polytheism and monotheism. That said, I am certain the priests of Amon-Re argued that the return to polytheism was natural just as I am convinced that Amenophis would have argued to the contrary.

<sup>886</sup> Thompson, *Bible* p. 297

eventually *erroneous* and *false*. This makes it permissible, even necessary, to allow for a degree of plurality of perceptions since each concept is seen as inevitably *partial*, *fragmented* and *incomplete*. Thompson finds this notion of inclusive monotheism particularly manifest in books like Job, Ecclesiastes and Isaiah in which, as he says, ‘we find an intellectual boldness and excitement that is much like what occurred in the writings of Plato or Sophocles in Athens’. In these texts ‘the stock phrases of tradition and piety are confronted directly, and the small ambitions of men are openly ridiculed. Even the ambitions of the pious and the wise are open to ruthless caricature. Such a voice, critical of tradition and its gods, is centred in the growing contrast between the divinely transcendent and the traditional gods of ancient song and story.’

Thompson envisages this monotheistic idea of a transcendent, universal and pluralistic God of life and spirit as stemming from a defining intellectual crisis which arose as a result of a growing awareness of the patent irrelevance of the gods of tradition and which took place all over the ancient world between the seventh and first centuries BCE. He sees this crisis as having been resolved in different ways and with varying degrees of atheism in different parts of the region. In the Aegean the gods and the cosmology of Homer and Hesiod were rejected both by the Greek playwrights in the fifth century BCE who ruthlessly exposed the popular fantasies about the gods, and by Plato in the fourth century who portrayed the ideal philosopher as a servant of reflection and seeker after self-knowledge. In India the same intellectual crisis, in which the traditional gods with their feet of clay were confronted, resulted in the writings of Buddhism. Elsewhere in Asia, somewhat in contrast to what happened in Greece, the traditions of the past were affirmed rather than rejected. They were seen as expressions of true though limited and human perceptions of reality. This resulted in the defining concept of inclusive monotheism found in the scriptures of both Zoroastrianism and the Bible, the unknowable and universal ‘God of heaven’ being *Ahura Mazda* for the Persians and *Elohe Shamayim* for the conquered nation of Israel. As Thompson says, the divine evoked by such titles ‘is hardly specific, multiple or personal’. For the divine world is now no longer a world of gods. Thus Yahweh, being no longer a god amongst gods – ‘the old storm deity of Palestine no longer exists’ – becomes the name, cryptic cipher and reflection of the divine itself. As such he functions as mediator between the human traditions and the divine. Such an understanding enabled the collectors of the tradition to express their understanding of a universal world order under the transcendent deity of Elohim while preserving the personal aspect of the divine that had been basic to the traditional folklore of Palestine – a solution which, as Thompson himself says, ‘might be described as a form of Platonism.’ Thompson concludes that the development of inclusive biblical monotheism ‘enabled the collectors of the Bible to pursue their primary goal of preserving a shattered, fragmented past through a reinterpretation that reflected their own world-view.’

*Thompson explains post-exilic revisionist monotheism  
not revolutionary Hebrew monotheism*

Two things strike me about Thompson’s explanations of the cause of monotheism in Israel. First is his determination to see it as the result of either Persian or Greek influences in the post-exilic period. Second is the tentativeness of the explanations

themselves. He rather thinks that exclusive biblical monotheism had something to do with the appearance of sectarian attitudes in post exilic Israel and that these sectarian attitudes in themselves had something to do with the rising influence of Greek syncretism, but there may have been other explanations, as for example the competitive aspects of Greek individualism! Then, again, he is pretty certain that the rise of inclusive biblical monotheism had to do with the influence of Zoroastrian monotheism and that its distinguishing characteristic was the desire to preserve the Palestinian Yahwist tradition and to see deity in terms of *life* and *spirit*. However, he doesn't make any attempt to substantiate these presuppositions. Nor does he take on board the fact that in Zoroastrianism the bodily state was considered superior to pure spirit.<sup>887</sup> So we are left to guess why the inventors of inclusive biblical monotheism were so insistent on preserving the old Palestinian traditions and why they were so determined to see God in terms of pure spirit. Of course Thompson goes on to suggest that the biblical writers sought to play off their new Israel against the old one. However, I find it rather difficult to imagine people carefully preserving a compendious tradition simply so as to use it as a foil to highlight their own, substantially contrary, endeavours.

As I see it, Thompson's inability to give a reasonably complete and credible account of the genesis of biblical monotheism is a direct result of his peculiar insistence on a post-exilic scenario for the process. If you think about it, what he offers us is not an explanation of the birth of biblical monotheism. Rather it is an account of the appearance of two contrasting types of monotheism associated with post-exilic biblical revisionism and, viewed in this light, his analysis is not without merit. However, viewed as an explanation of the rise of biblical monotheism itself, what he puts before us is quite inadequate since he doesn't even define the subject matter in a satisfactory manner. Of course, given his blindness to the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' ideology it is understandable that he should make the mistake of confusing the ideas of the post-exilic writers with those of the tradition itself. However, the mistake leaves him with a formidable problem on his hands since he has to explain the rise of biblical monotheism without being able to admit that he is dealing with a revisionist entity, which is to say with a construct built on previously existing, traditional notions such as *spirit* and *incompatibility*; notions which could be exploited by the post exilic priestly writers once cleansed of their unfortunate 'revolutionary' associations.

But what makes me so certain that Thompson is describing revisionist monotheisms? The expression he used that gives the game away is *transcendent*. I have always had bad feelings about this word, which is the reason why I first coined the term *metacosmic*. Formerly I was under the impression that the difficulty with the word transcendent was that it had too many religious connotations. However, Thompson has now convinced me that the true problem is ideological.

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<sup>887</sup> '... one may suppose Zoroaster's own emphasis on corporeal (*astvant-*) life as distinct from incorporeal. The Pahlavi terms for the two states are *menog* and *getig*, deriving from Avestan adjectives *\*mainyavaka* 'of the spirit' and *\*gaethyaka* "corporeal". No ethical distinction exists between these two, for both are the creation of Ahura Mazda, and hence good. Indeed what is remarkable in Zoroaster's teachings is that he evidently regarded the *getig* state as better than the *menog*, since in it the *menog* creation received the added good of tangible and sentient form. ' M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* p. 229-30.

Thompson himself habitually uses the term transcendent to designate not just the ‘high gods’ but also Israel’s monotheistic God and he makes it quite clear that what he means by the expression is a god who is so far removed from human beings that he is quite beyond their knowing, a fact which of itself makes humans aware of the essential limitedness of their understanding. Now the truth is that while the word transcendent, employed in this fashion, provides a perfectly good description of gods like Ahura Mazda and a somewhat partial description of the priestly writer’s God in Genesis<sup>888</sup> it is manifestly inadequate as a description of the Yahwist’s God in Genesis 2 ff, who clearly operates immanently. This latter God I have described as metacosmic, meaning by this that he behaves in such a way as to show his complete independence of the cosmos. Unlike the other ‘high gods’ he has no needs which the cosmos can satisfy, and no anxieties it can allay. It is not because he needs a comfortable dwelling place and fears chaos that he brings order to the universe. He does not build a garden for his own pleasure. He does not put man in charge of it so as to enjoy its produce himself. He does not create man to serve him because he finds it tiresome to have to provide for himself. He does not even create man because of a need to love or to be loved by someone. This highly unusual, not to say unique, *needless* characteristic which was only ever applied to Yahweh (and later, of course, in a secondary manner, to the Christian and Muslim god) eventually became enshrined in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the *ex nihilo* principle. By this it was understood that whereas the numerous ‘high gods’ created the world, in the sense of transforming it into something better (whether by ordering it or by turning it from spirit into body as in the case of Ahura Mazda) Yahweh created it in the far more radical sense of bringing it out of nothing. It does not really matter which of these two understandings of the metacosmic god one uses – the creator god who unlike all the other cosmic gods has no needs or the god who creates absolutely everything out of nothing – since both amount to the same thing in the end: the god who stands emphatically *alone* in being totally, and in every conceivable sense, *ex* the universe he created.<sup>889</sup>

As opposed to this extraordinary and unique metacosmic god, the transcendent god, who resides as far away from humanity in body and mind as the Persian king was from the ordinary conquered people in his far-flung empire, was a common or garden feature of the ancient world, as Thompson shows – as commonplace indeed as the phenomenon of empire which spawned it. So, explaining the appearance of a transcendent god in the Bible – which Thompson quite adequately manages to do – achieves nothing when it comes to explaining the presence of the metacosmic god who is clearly apparent in all of the biblical texts *including those of the priestly writer*. Had Thompson dealt with this

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<sup>888</sup> Partial because transcendent is not a fully adequate description of the deity in Genesis 1 who is, properly speaking, metacosmic.

<sup>889</sup> When an inhabitant of the universe *brings order to it* the act itself evidences a need. This aspect of need can only be completely removed from the creative endeavour, therefore, by having the creator perform from outside the universe and by having him create *ex nihilo*. In other words creation *ex nihilo* is the logical conclusion of insisting that the creator has no needs: creating *ex nihilo* = creating without needs. The biblical writers, including both J and P, make it quite clear that unlike all the other gods Yahweh was needless. That is the way in which they delineate him as the god who makes all the cosmic gods mere idols. However, as regards the creative act itself they had not worked this idea through to its logical, *ex nihilo* conclusion. They envisaged Yahweh as a *needless* creator present in the universe and bringing order to it *purely for its own sake*. This being the case, I find it does no harm to speak of the Genesis creation stories in terms of creation *ex nihilo* even if it is not strictly speaking what they say.

metacosmic god he would have known where the salient characteristics which distinguished the revisionist's monotheistic (i.e. transcendent) gods came from. For *spirit* (the salient feature of Thompson's *inclusive* monotheistic God) and *incompatibility* (the salient feature of his *exclusive* monotheistic God) are characteristics intrinsic to the Yahwist's metacosmic god who, being ideologically out with this world, is incommensurate with all that is cosmic, including those forces making for the survival-of-the-fittest which govern it.

So though we can learn something from Thompson about post-exilic revisionist monotheism, when it comes to the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' monotheism he clearly leaves us none the wiser. However, perhaps Yair Hoffman can help us.

*Unexamined presuppositions in the monotheism debate*

In an article written in 1994 dealing with monotheism in Israel<sup>890</sup> Hoffman sums up the present-day spread of scholarly opinion as to how monotheism in Israel arose by citing two extreme positions. On the one hand he gives the example of Y. Kaufman who claims that from the very beginning monotheism was so rooted in the Israelite consciousness that the people themselves never understood that idols were representations and consequently mistook all idolatry for primitive fetishism. On the other hand he cites P. Lemche who claims that until the Deuteronomistic reform there was no distinction between Israelite and Canaanite religion; that Yahweh was originally identified with Baal and subordinate to El; that it was only later that the prophets denied this identification, demanding that the Israelites worship Yahweh alone and that this process only developed into a monotheistic belief after the exile.<sup>891</sup>

Hoffman proceeds to test these competing theories by examining the concept of 'alien deities' in Deuteronomy. What I find interesting is not so much his conclusions (he ends by taking a position close to that of Lemche, claiming that Israelite monotheism came about progressively) as his unexamined presuppositions. Two of them are intimately connected and strike me as fundamentally questionable. First, like most biblical scholars, Hoffman clearly believes he is justified in treating the subject as a hermetically sealed religious question for he completely ignores ideological considerations. Second, again like most biblical scholars, he operates with the unavowed assumption that the arrival of monotheism within Israel (whenever this took place) was in itself a significant cultural achievement. Hoffman may protest that his argument does not involve this presupposition since his purpose is to try and determine *when* a monotheistic belief appeared. However, it is such a common assumption that he must know that people are bound to infer it when he closes his paper with a disparaging remark about the struggle of Israelite monotheism 'with all kinds of paganism'.<sup>892</sup>

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<sup>890</sup> Yair Hoffman, *The Concept of 'Other Gods' in the Deuteronomistic Literature in Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, JSOT Supplement 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994)

<sup>891</sup> Hoffman, *Concept*, pp. 67-9.

<sup>892</sup> Hoffman, *Concept*, p.84.

Hebrew monotheism was not achieved by a cultural victory over paganism. Of course, if it is assumed that monotheism is a civilisation construct (i.e. a question of culture) then the superiority of a single, dignified, moral deity over against that of a squabbling group of competitors can seem self-evident. However, when it comes to biblical monotheism such a scenario simply will not do since we have come to see the Hebrews' standpoint in terms of an ideological struggle conducted by marginals, or former marginals, *against* the marginalizing tendencies of civilisation. This means that we have to reject the notion that biblical monotheism came about as a result of the Israelites' struggle against paganism, whatever this word may mean, and it is noticeable that scholars seldom attempt to define it precisely,<sup>893</sup> though, clearly, sex is never very far from their minds! I believe that those who build their arguments on this anti-paganism thesis have in the back of their minds a scenario in which god-fearing civilisation forces are pitted against godless civilisation-destroyers. I can understand such a pattern being used to illuminate certain historical situations. For example it seems to me to be precisely the sort of predicament we find described in the Amarna letters where the Egyptian authorities in a far corner of their empire (Palestine) are struggling to deal with the encroaching Habiru bands.<sup>894</sup> However, it surely cannot be appropriate as a way of understanding the thinking that was going on in the early Hebrew community for they were the godless<sup>895</sup> marginals and their Canaanite adversaries were the god-fearing defenders of civilisation.

*Hebrew monotheism results from shaming the pagan gods  
not from defeating them*

On the basis of the god-of-the-marginals perspective there are clearly two things we should *expect* as regards the probable Hebrew attitude towards the gods of the other nations. In the first place, in so far as these other gods displayed centrarchal characteristics (as would invariably have been the case) we should expect *naked and unbridled hostility*. In the second place, in so far as these other gods displayed cosmological characteristics we should expect *ill-disguised contempt*. The point to note very carefully here is that in neither case would we expect to find early Israelites *denying the existence* of the other gods since in an ideological struggle the concreteness of the opposing political force is taken for granted. A struggle implies a real enemy, not an imaginary one. No one in his right mind would think that you could dispose of ideological opposition simply by believing it away. When the Maoists in China wanted to deal with their ideological opponents they did so not by denying their existence but by characterising them as 'paper tigers'. In the case of the pharaoh Amenophis IV things were rather different. He was in a position to effectively shut down the political activity of his opponents. Thus, in pronouncing the non-existence of Amon-Re and all the other traditional gods he was not believing them away but rather burying the political power they represented – or so he believed.

Given this materialist understanding, in which a particular god is not seen as a disembodied religious ideal but rather as a representation of the collective interest of a living community, backed up by its collective determination and will, it would be the

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<sup>893</sup> Hoffman is no exception.

<sup>894</sup> *ANET* pp. 486-489.

<sup>895</sup> Godless in the eyes of the Canaanites.

height of folly to deny the existence of other gods – unless one was in the enviable situation of an all-powerful pharaoh. Early Israel was far from being in such a happy situation. She was a community of former marginals whose presence was a scandal to the world's *natural* rulers and the enormous concentrations of power they were able to wield. Consequently, there is nothing in the least bit surprising in Hoffman's finding, which is that the existence of other gods was accepted in pre-exilic Israel.

But this is not the whole picture because, as I have previously pointed out, the contradictory nature of the god-of-the-marginals idea vis-à-vis the cosmic situation had given rise in early Israel to the metacosmic notion, which meant that the battle between Yahweh and the other gods was seen as taking place between ideological entities which were supremely *unequal* at least in their eyes. Thus, in spite of everything we have just said, for the Hebrews *these cosmic gods were, properly speaking, not gods at all when viewed in the light of metacosmic Yahweh!* Hoffman finds clear evidence of both of these contradictory views within the Deuteronomic texts. However, for him their presence is not, as for us, something that is logical and to be expected. For in his narrow religious understanding monotheism is seen as *a superseding development* in which two positions making up a before and after *should not normally be exhibited by the same individual at the same moment in time*. For him, therefore, the fact that this contradiction does sometimes occur is an embarrassment which has to be swept under the carpet:

It seems that through the clouded Dtr writings some patches of clear evidence illuminate an uneven process which ended as unequivocal monotheism in the exilic period. Before the exile some Deuteronomistic authors expressed the exclusiveness of Yahweh in credo-like declarations, which did not correspond to the concepts of other gods expressed by the very same authors. To put it differently, the prevailing Deuteronomistic concept of other gods as real (though impotent for Israel) deities contradicted Dtr's concept of the uniqueness of Yahweh, but both coexisted side by side. Is such a symbiosis absurd? No, it is just a human paradox, and therefore an intelligible reality.<sup>896</sup>

For Hoffman the exilic writings of Second Isaiah (Is 40-55) constitute the moment at which the succeeding monotheistic emphasis crystallized, thus finally superseding the former pluralistic view:

.... the late authors, whose monotheistic faith was more crystallized and refined, refrained from using a term (other gods) which seemed to them too ambiguous and not sharp enough. The most conspicuous example is Second Isaiah....<sup>897</sup>

However, from Israel's Hebrew standpoint there probably was no difference in substance<sup>898</sup> between the so-called 'monotheism' of exilic Second Isaiah and the 'not yet quite monotheistic' pre-exilic Deuteronomic writings – not to mention the Yahwist's even earlier 'not obviously monotheistic though certainly not polytheistic' contributions. In other words *the change Hoffman rightly identifies is probably not, as he would seem to imply, ideological in the sense of pertaining to the changing way in which the nature of Yahweh was viewed. It was rather circumstantial, pertaining to the changing conditions of the viewers*. In the case of the exiles (the re-marginalised group of descendants of former marginals) their future seemed completely hopeless, given

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<sup>896</sup> Hoffman, *Concept*, p. 81.

<sup>897</sup> Hoffman, *Concept*, p. 74.

<sup>898</sup> i.e. an ideological difference expressed as a new perspective on Yahweh's character.



their condition as captive slaves in the very heart of the mighty Babylonian empire. In this situation Isaiah proclaimed the same old Hebrew message – that in the face of Yahweh *all* centrarchical forces are idols (i.e. paper tigers) devoid of the life-giving forces of creativity and imagination which were Israel's for the taking if only she would be faithful to her Lord. However, given Israel's dire straits, he naturally sounded this metacosmic note with as much emphasis as he could muster, so much so that it tended to drown out the underlying picture of ideological struggle. But given the circumstances it can hardly have appeared necessary for him to state the obvious: *that the centrarchical powers still existed and constituted a real menace.*

The simple fact is that *I can identify no dramatic ideological change – no clear change in the perceived nature of Yahweh as god of the marginals – in the biblical texts until the priestly revisionism of the post exilic period when the metacosmic god-of-the-marginals idea actually disappears to be replaced by the metacosmic-god idea standing alone.* This leads me to conclude that Israel's monotheism was the result of a development set in motion by the god-of-the-marginals idea and that it stemmed directly from the secondary metacosmic notion<sup>899</sup> which accompanied it: the inference being that since there could be no real comparison between the force which created the universe itself and the natural cosmic forces which inhabited<sup>900</sup> it the creator himself must logically stand alone. In other words Israel's monotheism was nothing more than yet another logical implication of the original god-of-the-marginals idea. Since I take it as axiomatic that this latter notion was an expression of the group interests which brought into existence the unity which the biblical writers refer to as Israel (whenever that was and whoever these people were<sup>901</sup>) I have a certain sympathy with Kaufman's contention that monotheism was rooted in Israel's consciousness *from the very beginning* – though, of course, it is nonsense for him to pretend that the Israelites misunderstood the representational nature of idolatry since the whole nature of their thinking was representational. If I take issue with Kaufman's claim it is only in that, to my mind, it focuses too much attention on monotheism itself, which I see as a derivative notion, since I believe *the substance of Israel's faith did not lie in this religious notion or indeed in any other religious notion but rather in the political idea of the metacosmic god of the marginals which both underlay it and engendered it.*

If this ideological reading of the texts (which avoids all the difficulties created by the alternative cultural reading) is correct we can be perfectly certain that Hebrew monotheism was not influenced by the monotheistic developments in either Egypt or Iran.<sup>902</sup> In other words Israel's monotheism was not in point of fact the same beast as Egyptian or Zoroastrian monotheism, making anything more than a superficial comparison unprofitable. Having said that, it seems to me highly probable that Zoroaster's priestly monotheism did provide the returning exiles with the moralistic pattern for their revisionist, monotheistic model in which the political god-of-the-marginals idea was jettisoned, leaving the derivative religious metacosmic-god notion standing alone. This, after all, is the natural way in which priests (and academics), as

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<sup>899</sup> And not from Polytheism.

<sup>900</sup> Those whom the Yahwist terms 'the sons of God' (Gen 6.2)

<sup>901</sup> See pp. 414-419 below for discussion on who they were.

<sup>902</sup> For an account of the rather less significant historical and cultural reasons for refusing a connection between the Mosaic and Akenaton monotheisms see Donald B. Redford *Egypt* pp. 377-382.

civilisation intellectuals (clerks), habitually operate to eradicate what they see as subversive ideas which threaten their positions and privileges:

Hebrew Monotheism (e.g. Genesis Chapter 2 & 3)	Post-Exilic Priestly Monotheism (e.g. Genesis Chapter 1)
<p>Yahweh as god of the marginals ↓ Yahweh's metacosmic nature ↓ Yahweh's monotheistic nature</p>	<p>Yahweh as metacosmic god  ↓ Yahweh's monotheistic nature</p>
A subversive political idea	A safe establishment-religious idea

In this regard it could be said that Second Isaiah's blanket denial of existence to all the other gods was a fault in that it so exalted the metacosmic and monotheistic ideas that peoples' attention was inevitably drawn away from the fundamentally much more important god-of-the-marginals principle which had generated them. However, it seems to me that, unlike the priestly writers, second Isaiah cannot properly be accused of revisionism since his text contains clear references to the god-of-the-marginals idea.<sup>903</sup> More importantly it also witnesses to this idea indirectly by introducing another derivative idea: Israel as Yahweh's faithful servant who was destined to be the light to lighten the Gentiles (see Chapter 15).

### *Conclusion*

This brief examination has adequately confirmed our suspicion that monotheism is not, as has all too often been supposed, the sublime terminal point of religious achievement. All the evidence suggests that in the ancient Near East monotheism came about as a result of ideological pressures. Furthermore it would seem that different sorts of ideological pressures produced different monotheisms, making it impossible to judge adequately between them except on ideological grounds. In Israel's case it was her commitment to the god of the marginals which brought about her idiosyncratic form of monotheism through the intermediary metacosmic idea.

### *Hebrew Monotheism and Analytical Thought*

Before we close this chapter one crucial question remains to be answered. If analytical thought is the culminating stage in religious development how does Hebrew monotheism relate to this development?

It seems to me that in so far as Hebrew monotheism relates at all to this pattern of development it does so only marginally. It relates to it to the extent that it certainly

<sup>903</sup> See Is 40.29-31, 41.8-9, 14-17, 42.2-3,

itself makes full use of mythological language – there being at the time no better alternative. However, it only relates *tangentially* because it never itself willingly gives way to superstition, which indeed it treats like the plague. This was not, of course, because the Hebrews shared our modern analytical anti-superstition bent but because they abhorred all cosmological pretension. They treated superstition as they treated all attempts to control the future by harnessing natural forces.<sup>904</sup> In short, they saw superstition as just another way of trying to guarantee the future, which they thought should be left in Yahweh's hands.

Where does this leave us? Does this natural demise of superstition,<sup>905</sup> which has come about in our day with the arrival of analytical thought, mean that we should now give up thinking and speaking of God as a person and instead start thinking of him as an impersonal ideology (as it may often appear that I do)? It is necessary for us to remind ourselves that this is not such a new and strange question as it may seem, for it has long been recognised that thinking or speaking positively of God *in any way at all* is fraught with danger. This was the reason for the development of the so-called *via negativa* in which God was only spoken about in negative terms as being immortal, immutable, unchanging, infinite etc. This *via negativa* reminds us that the biblical description of God as a person, father or daddy has quite regularly been seen as risky in that it opens the door to the delusion of picturing him in our own image.<sup>906</sup> Of course, the *via negativa* argument is rather different from that based on a repudiation of superstition for it suggests that the idea of personality *is altogether inadequate* to represent the nature of what we are talking about whereas the argument from superstition is that such a representation *is altogether too flattering*. In other words it all boils down to the question whether a universe like ours implies a creator. If it is decided that it does then the argument from superstition goes out of the window, whereas if it is decided that it doesn't then it is the *via negativa* argument which becomes redundant. The problem is, as we have already pointed out, that there is simply no hope of us ever deciding this issue one way or the other since it requires an ability to position oneself *ex the universe* – either by finding a way to get outside of it or before/after it.

So the short answer to our question is that nothing has yet taken place which in any way *forces* us to speak about the god of the marginals scenario<sup>907</sup> in impersonal terms

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<sup>904</sup> This is not to suggest that the Israelites were former-day Luddites. They had nothing against technology as archaeology demonstrates. What they objected to was the belief that such advances were in themselves capable of guaranteeing human happiness; an attitude Jesus himself attacks in his story of the rich farmer. Lk.12:16.

<sup>905</sup> Which, of course, is far from being yet complete.

<sup>906</sup> *The via negativa is a form of apologetics, also sometimes called the via negationis. According to the philosophy behind the via negativa, God is not an object in the universe and, therefore, it is not possible to describe God through words and concepts, which are necessarily limiting. It is, instead, better to talk about God based upon what God is not. The via negativa is, therefore, a means of coming to know God, and what God is, through negation. Although the via negativa is often associated with Christianity because it is one of the three ways which Thomas Aquinas describes as coming to understand God, it has also appeared in other theistic religions. Names given to it include neti neti in Hinduism, ein-sof in Judaism and bila faifa in Islam. See Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia on 'Negative theology'.*

<sup>907</sup> The word is inadequate but I can produce nothing better. What I have in mind is the revelation we all, sometime in our lives, experience: that, however much we are tempted to do so, we have no right to trash another human being.

or else lose all integrity. In saying above that the summit of religious development is the analytical approach I was not implying that religion of itself naturally deconstructs and in time disappears (as the reader may have wrongly supposed). For I was only talking about religion in terms of language and thus of religion *as a means of discussing the human predicament in the universe*. In this context it is superstition along with all of the cosmological deities which deconstruct and disappear when the analytical approach is discovered and employed. The metacosmic god, for his part remains, as ever, quite untouched. This is because the material revelation we all experience concerning the inadmissibility of trashing fellow human beings remains and persists however much we choose to ignore it and this of itself gives rise to the suspicion that there is somehow more to this universe than the survival-of-the-fittest law of the jungle. In other words, the revelation which we all receive of the god of the marginals relativises what we know of this world. It may be, of course, that this revelation is nothing but an illusion which has become genetically imprinted on us for the good of the species, there being nothing, as it were, lying behind it. However, the fact is that there never will be a way of actually proving or disproving such a thesis, as we have already made clear. Having said that, I would suggest that modern biblicists have a interest in eschewing religion-speak whenever possible. For it is inevitable that, if they don't, increasingly large numbers of people will simply turn off. This will be both because they react *against* what they have come to see, whether rightly or wrongly, as superstitious attitudes and because they have become captured by all the possibilities which analytical language opens up to them.

## Chapter 13

### The Ethical Idea

In the last two chapters we examined some of the important religious ideas found in the Genesis-Exodus text to ascertain whether they can be adequately accounted for in the terms of our general thesis that the text itself resulted from a revolution/ revisionism process. Now in this present chapter we will examine in this same light the third Mosaic idea identified by A. B. Davidson: that Yahweh was ethical and demanded a moral life

#### *Much Ideology but Little Ethics in the Old Testament?*

Perhaps we should begin by admitting that the ethic of the Jewish Bible is often subject to a bad press. Even Christians are prone to speak about the Old Testament deity as a god of anger and retribution, in sharp contrast with the one they claim to find in the New Testament, whom they describe as a god of love. In his article '*Ethics and the Old Testament*' Philip Davies appears to sympathise with this position:

It is precisely where many biblical scholars see the high ethical watermark of the OT that I fail to see coherence, foundational principles, or ethical reflection. One finds Zion theology, the holiness of the god, the hatred of the god, the marital status of the god, the vengeance or inscrutability of the god, his monopoly, authority and much else being used as a reason for doing what the prophet says: much religion, little ethics and not a lot of consistency.<sup>908</sup>

Here Davies contrasts ethics with religion. He does this by underlining what he sees as the essentially *political* nature of the process whereby ethics arise. For him, what we call ethics is the result of a natural, one might almost say 'democratic', process within a community, working from the bottom - or at least close to it - whereas religion, which he appears to see, in the Old Testament at least, as the product of a hierarchy, is artificially imposed.<sup>909</sup> Davies acknowledges almost no difference between the ethical views of Israel's prophets and those of the surrounding civilizations.<sup>910</sup> The inference seems to be that if Israel differed from other ancient Near Eastern communities it was

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<sup>908</sup> *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium* Edited by John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies & M. Daniel Carroll R. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) p. 172.

<sup>909</sup> 'Indeed, so long as any social system presents its members with a set of rules of conduct which it claims to have divine origin and which must simply be obeyed on pain of punishment, I cannot see that we are dealing with ethics at all; rather with a totalitarian system in which individual will and freedom exist only to be sacrificed to the supreme authority of someone's deity. On the contrary, where systems of behaviour are customary, or traditional, interpreted by elders and by the members of society, slowly evolved, learnt, internalised, we have a better model of an ethical society because the rules elicit to a greater extent the consent of those who obey them, and indeed, those who obey them also make them.' Davies, *Ethics* p.172-3

<sup>910</sup> 'Where [the prophets] are concerned with ethics (which is by no means their primary concern) they claim that oppression of the underprivileged is wrong (as do the legal books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus), and commend the practice of justice (as does the wisdom of Proverbs). There is little in their actual content – in the virtues that they call for – that distinguishes them from the laws or wisdom writings. Indeed, throughout the O T. what actually counts for good behaviour hardly varies at all. I could add that it hardly varies from the principles of right behaviour found in every other ancient near eastern civilisation.' Davies, *Ethics* p. 172.

as a result of her religious views, her ethics being rather commonplace, hampered as they were by these oppressive, hierarchical religious notions.<sup>911</sup>

As I see it Davies works with a very black and white model of the way in which human behaviour is socially directed and controlled. For him ideology, in the form of religion or theology, is an artificial and hierarchical means by which certain types of behaviour are imposed on subordinates, whereas ethics is the natural, democratic way in which behaviour is self-imposed by all and sundry. This, it seems to me, basically constitutes a neo-anarchist<sup>912</sup> approach. In classical anarchism it is the state which corrupts and it is the universal natural human instinct to do good which, in the absence of state interference, causes humanity to flourish.<sup>913</sup> Here, with Davies, it is ideology in the form of theology and religion which plays the nefarious coercive role and it is a naturally emergent ethics which, when shielded from theology and religion, is able to bring about a proper, humanistic control of behaviour in society.

To do him justice Davies does not argue that the Yahwist himself<sup>914</sup> or any other biblical writer adopted this neo-anarchist approach. His interest is in the way in which the Bible is used by modern exegetes as an ethical text for people today and he offers his 'ethics versus religion' model as a way of criticising the Bible from a modern perspective. Unfortunately it proves somewhat inadequate for the job. Take his model's first presupposition: that ethics plays a universally accepted and positive role in society. Being thus defined – as the highest common moral factor – the art of ethics itself is so trivialised that it ceases to be of any practical use. It is certainly true that people presented with a moral issue instinctively reach for these bedrock beliefs. However, in those cases which matter – i.e. where there is disagreement – it very soon becomes obvious that such principles are incapable of resolving these particular moral dilemmas. And, of course, it is in just such circumstances that people start bringing out their ideological convictions; for example when they *support* a disputed accusation of theft by introducing the idea of private property or, alternatively, when they *challenge* the same accusation by introducing the idea of exploitation. At this point ethics, as the art of judging moral behaviour, becomes a business of *deciding between rival ideological views* and here Davies' commonly agreed fundamental ethical principles turn out to be of no earthly use.

Then, again, take the other negative presupposition upon which Davies builds his model: that all ideology is fundamentally oppressive. This too, on examination, turns out to be flawed. The thesis itself is founded on the supposition that ideology (at least in the form of religion or theology) is hierarchical, which is simply not the case. It is not just hierarchs who wish to export their ideological convictions. All sections of society, and indeed even those excluded from it, do likewise. In fact it is human nature to behave thus and we *all* export our ideological convictions *all* of the time as we react to the human scene around us, *even those of us who behave somewhat timidly*. Of course it

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<sup>911</sup> 'So is it perhaps the *absence* of a transcendental deity that makes ethics ethics?' Davies, *Ethics* p. 173.

<sup>912</sup> In my vocabulary this is not a term of abuse. Quite the contrary.

<sup>913</sup> For my understanding of the salient differences between Anarchism and Yahwism see pp. 230-31 below.

<sup>914</sup> He doesn't in fact believe there was such a person.

is true that there are different ways in which we can choose to do this. We may, for example, speak or behave proactively, laying down the law. Or, alternatively we may choose to operate reactively, assuming a commonly held ideological conviction and drawing conclusions about behaviour from it. And, of course, in operating in either of these ways we may behave either provocatively, humorously or on the back foot with one eyebrow raised, so the permutations and combinations are endless. However, the important thing to understand is that *all* of this behaviour is ideological (i.e. in an ancient context religious or spiritual), making it perfectly fatuous to pretend that *any* free human being *ever* behaves otherwise in the ethical/political domain.<sup>915</sup> Indeed, it could only be possible for a person to avoid behaving ideologically by returning to a pre-conscious animal state, something people rarely want to do or indeed are capable of doing even when they want to.

There are times when it seems to me that Davies comes close to seeing this point:

What is the ethical responsibility of the modern exegete? ... I do not see how a responsible exegete can pretend to a neutral or objective position. My own anti-religious approach to ethics is, I hope, clear enough, and I expect that others in this volume will feel as happy to expose their own prejudices too.<sup>916</sup>

Of course I applaud his understanding that no one can approach the subject of ethics devoid of prejudice. However, what baffles me is his supposition that the scholarly viewpoint has a special validity, making it a worthwhile exercise for people like him to publish their prejudices over against those found in the biblical texts. Since he never tries to justify this conviction we are left to guess what his justifications are. Perhaps he believes we should honour the prejudice of scholars since, as representatives of civilisation, their views are from the centre of society and, as such, wholesomely moderate – unlike those of the biblical writers?<sup>917</sup> Or maybe he works on the assumption that prejudices are subject to the effects of human progress, giving twentieth century scholars a better view of the grain of the universe than their ancient counterparts? I cannot believe he would be happy with either of these imputations, which, if they were true, would be shameful conceits.<sup>918</sup>

Though Davies' black and white distinction between ethics and religion is clearly invalid, that is not to say that there are no true distinctions to be drawn. For example, it is evidently the case that self discipline is a more effective way of controlling behaviour than authoritarian discipline, which means that where it is appropriate self discipline should always be preferred as a means of social direction. However, no one but a fool would argue that it is *never* appropriate to punish socially harmful behaviour or that it is *never* inappropriate to appeal to self-discipline, so it is naive to imply, as Davies does, that self discipline is good and authoritarian discipline bad.

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<sup>915</sup> There is, of course, plenty of behaviour which is ethically neutral, which lies outside this discussion.

<sup>916</sup> Davies, *Ethics* p.173

<sup>917</sup> Not all, of course, because some biblical writers – P for instance – share Davies' civilisation prejudices.

<sup>918</sup> It is certainly true that technical ideas (see above p. 61) are subject to development. However, the ruling political idea in any ideology, which determines what is considered to be the proper way of exercising human power and creativity, is not. This is why the Yahwist's *God of the Marginals* idea, which Jesus clearly shared, stands as a judgement on every human being for all time.

Then, again, there is clearly a true distinction to be made between proactive discipline (i.e. affirming an ideological position and seeking to impose it on people) and reactive discipline (i.e. assuming a shared ideological position and drawing consequences about peoples' behaviour). However, this does not mean that we can call the former *coercive ideology* and the latter *liberating ethics*, as Davies seems to want to do, since there is clearly just as much ideology involved in both, the only difference being that in one case it is up front whereas in the other it is a background assumption.

Yet again, it is perfectly true to say that there is a difference between proactive and reactive speech-forms, a command being a typical example of the former and a rhetorical question of the latter. This however, does not mean that if a person chooses to couch what he wants to say as a command that he must therefore be talking 'ideology', rather than 'ethics' as Davies seems to believe. Take the last five commandments in the Decalogue:

You shall not kill.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.  
You shall not covet your neighbour's house; ... or anything that is your neighbours.<sup>919</sup>

These clearly constitute an attempt to summarise the basic principles of behaviour which every human being of all ages would be happy to sign up to. They are, therefore, what Davies' calls 'ethics' and there is nothing in the least bit remarkable about them. However, the form in which they are presented is the proactive command, just as is the case with the first five commandments which, in sharp distinction, are brim full of what Davies calls 'ideology':

You shall have no other gods before me.  
You shall not make yourself a graven image ...  
You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain ...  
Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ...  
Honour your father and mother. ...<sup>920</sup>

It would, of course, have been possible for the biblical writer to couch the second five 'ethical' principles as rhetorical questions but had he decided to do so he would not thereby have changed their ideological character or made them less authoritative:

Do you think you should be allowed to kill?  
Do you think it should be permissible to commit adultery?  
Do you think you should be free to steal?

Once more it is, clearly, perfectly possible to make a distinction between what might be called common ethics (Davies' 'ethics'), which is to say the basic principles everyone subscribes to because they are human beings, and special ethics (Davies' 'ideology'), the principles people adhere to because of social affiliations due to their class, gender, race, maturity, age, physical state or simple appearance. However, it is quite inadmissible to pretend, as Davies does, that we can dispense with special ethics and content ourselves with the common sort, thereby sidetracking the difficulties raised by ideological struggle. It is true that establishments often try to make out that their ethics

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<sup>919</sup> Ex 13-17.

<sup>920</sup> Ex 3-12.



stem directly from natural law (Davies' 'Ethics'), and that the ethics of those who challenge them are just ill disguised special interest (Davies' 'ideology'), but few are taken in by such pretences. The fact is that there is no way of separating ethics from ideology for ethics is simply the art of resolving moral dilemmas, using, amongst other things, ideological presuppositions which are either up front, as in the Bible, or hidden away, as is often the case in civilisation-societies like our own.

### *Comparing Old Testament and Babylonian Ethics*

Let us turn now to look at the texts themselves to see if it is true, as Davies says, that there is little difference between the ethical viewpoint of the OT and that of the other ancient near eastern civilizations. The easiest way of doing this is to restrict our examination to Israel's law codes since these offer the chance of making a structured comparison between Israel's ethics and those of the surrounding nations. However, it will be necessary to consider what we are doing in taking this step. Up till now we have confined our study to Genesis and Exodus because source criticism has provided us with a way of distinguishing the work of the Yahwist from that of P and his friends in these texts. This was not absolutely necessary, of course, since it would have been perfectly possible to extract the 'revolutionary' and revisionist positions in the text simply by using ideological analysis on its own. However, it is undeniable that source criticism has made the process a lot easier as well as adding weight to the conclusions. This is an important consideration, given our experience that most civilisation folk (and especially scholars) don't actually want to recognise the god-of-the-marginals ideology. However, the truth is that the Genesis/Exodus text does not provide a reliable way of comparing the relative ethics of P and J since most of the requisite material is contained in law codes which cannot be taken as being the constructs of individuals, however much it may be argued that individual editors have ideologically coloured them. So, instead of comparing the ethics of J and P we find ourselves now comparing the ethics found in the biblical law codes with those found in the Babylonian law codes, the object being to try to identify Israel's ethical idiosyncrasies if we can. However, it is important to understand that any peculiarity we may find is just as likely to be the result of Israel's revisionism as of her 'revolutionary' endeavour. So every time we identify such an idiosyncrasy we will have to ask ourselves from which of these two ideological streams the particular ethical concept stemmed.

Since Hans Jochen N. Boecker<sup>921</sup> and, following him, John H Walton<sup>922</sup> have produced comparative studies of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern Law codes I base my analysis on their findings. I have followed Walton's general approach in comparing the codes as regards their *content*, *form*, and *function* and I begin the discussion of each item by setting out Boecker's and Walton's conclusions in a tabular form: the identified distinctive feature of the Hebrew codes being found in the left hand column and the way in which these features are accounted for in the right hand one.

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<sup>921</sup> H. J. N. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (London: SPCK, 1980)

<sup>922</sup> J. H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989)

1. Differences in the codes as regards content

<p>THEFT</p> <p>The Old Testament ‘puts much less emphasis on crimes of theft than the code of Hammurabi does’<sup>923</sup>; whereas the latter reflects a high ‘interest in the protection of property’ and a ‘rigorous punishment mentality’, the Old Testament codes are lenient, there is no death penalty for theft or receiving stolen property except where a slave is the property in question. A reasonable restitution and compensation seem to be the motivation, rather than punishment.</p>	<p>In Israel theft was regarded as ‘the typical crime of the hungry poor’ (as in Deut 23.25f: a person may eat, but not take away, grapes on another’s vine or grain from his field). The relative leniency of the Old Testament codes is due to Israel’s ‘social bias’. But the nomadic culture also underlies the law, which is concerned less about theft at the expense of an individual owner than of the community<sup>924</sup>.</p>
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Boecker in part explains the idiosyncratic nature of Israelite Law by reference to Israel’s supposed underlying nomadic culture. Such a thesis, however, is now unsustainable. This means that we are left with his explanation of the relative tolerance shown in biblical Law towards acts of theft as resulting from *Israel’s social bias towards the hungry poor*. Since no one has been able to show any reason why Israel’s revisionist and centrarchal authorities would have had such a bias and, since it would have been without precedent for people of their ilk, I conclude that we are dealing here with a practice which stemmed from the underlying ‘revolutionary’ focus. That is to say, these laws were basically designed to express the will of Yahweh as god of the marginals. As such, they present themselves not just as a sensible way for the community to deal with the harmful disturbances caused by theft but also as the expression of Yahweh’s fundamental nature as the one who is in solidarity with social outcasts. This being the case, I have to say that I find ‘the hungry poor’ an ill-fitting description of the people the lawmakers must have had in mind when drawing up these ordinances. The general run of impoverished people on the bottom rung of civilisation’s ladder are not necessarily any more likely to resort to thieving than anyone else within the community. It is people who have dropped out, the marginals, who practice such arts, because *they have no part in society* and, as a consequence, *no other way of existing* and, what is more, *no face to lose*.

<p>ADULTERY</p> <p>Adultery and other sexual offences, though crimes under both the Code of Hammurabi and the Old Testament codes, were dealt with more exhaustively in the Code of Hammurabi. The significant difference in treatment is that while in the Code of Hammurabi adultery is a sort of ‘private’ crime in which the judgement and the punishment were administered by the victim (in most cases the husband, of course), in the Old Testament sexual crimes were considered to be an evil which afflicted Israel as a whole and, as such, had to be purged. (Deut. 22.22; Lev.19.29-30)</p>	<p>In Israel, ‘safeguarding the marital relationship (was) particularly important for the viability of an ordered society. Adultery threatens that society’. More importantly, Israel stood implacably against the Canaanite fertility cults (‘the religious ideologisation of sexuality’) because these were ‘not compatible with Yahweh’s sovereignty.’ It should be remembered that Israel never condemned sexuality as such, nor enjoined sexual asceticism as an ideal.<sup>925</sup></p>
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<sup>923</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.84

<sup>924</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.166 - 171.

<sup>925</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.113.

Here Boecker presents us with the old argument that Israel's sexual mores were dictated by her horror of the Canaanite fertility cults. As previously pointed out I believe the sexual allusions in the Bible's anti-Canaanite tirades have everything to do with ideological criticism and nothing (or almost nothing) to do with sexual practices.<sup>926</sup> Boecker also appears to imply that the Israelites were more aware of the deleterious effects of adultery on the smooth functioning of society than were the Mesopotamians. This seems most unlikely since the Mesopotamians were running a vastly more sophisticated operation. I find it much more probable that what we have here is the Hebrew's unusual recognition that adultery, as a trashing of the spouse, was a marginalization taking place at a most intimate and therefore most dangerous level within the community. I suggest that, for the Israelites, adultery constituted the wilful undermining of a particularly valuable social structure which naturally tended to engender ideological wholesomeness – two people leaving their respective parental situations and becoming one flesh (note how the natural unoppressiveness of this structure is emphasised by having the man leave his family and go to live with his wife, contrary to patriarchal practice). If I am right, the biblical condemnation of adultery has to be a product of Israel's 'revolutionary' stream of thought and not of her priestly revisionism.

<p>ADOPTION</p> <p>Adoption is never mentioned in the Old Testament law codes (nor even in the narratives). However, the Code of Hammurabi quite positively regulated it.</p> <p>The symbolic adoption of the king by God in Psalm 2.7 and 2Sam 7.14 is a backhanded recognition of the custom of human adoption in ancient near-eastern societies, though not, apparently, in Israel.</p>	<p>Three explanations are offered, the first two being rejected as inadequate.</p> <p>1. Israelite polygamy, as contrasted with Babylonian monogamy, reduced the likelihood of childlessness and therefore the need for adoption. But polygamy was, in fact, not very common, so this cannot be the explanation for the absence of adoption.</p> <p>2. The levirate custom whereby a childless widow had a right to have a child by her brother-in-law (Ruth 4 et al), amounted to a sort of adoption. But this would not help living, childless couples.</p> <p>3. The reason must be theological, that is, that God must be the sole decider about a man's descendants. Adoption would be a 'human manipulation', taking the place of God's blessing.</p> <p><sup>927</sup></p>
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I find Boecker ideologically on the right track here, though his explanation is somewhat cryptic and requires filling out. Centrism naturally produces a controlling and authoritarian ideology since the reason for the creation of a centre is in order to establish sway over the surrounding community. Of course, in the case of Near Eastern societies the idea of control extended much further than mere political and economic domination. Indeed the centre was held responsible for every aspect of life, from the guaranteeing of such important commodities as water to the provision of justice. In fact the fertility rites we spoke of above were simply the way in which the centrarchs attempted to guarantee the next season's fruits. By contrast, the god-of-the-marginals

<sup>926</sup> It is true the Bible is opposed to fertility cults but the sex marker would suggest it is on ideological grounds not sexual grounds.

<sup>927</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.120-121.

ideology naturally tended to see all aspects of life as free gifts of Yahweh. Consequently every effort to control the course of events, for example by adopting a child, was liable to be judged an inadmissible attempt to short circuit Yahweh's will and force his hand. What we are dealing with here, therefore, has to be a product of Israel's 'revolutionary' stream of thought since, as we have seen, revisionism constituted a belief in authority and a return to centrism.

<p>THE TREATMENT OF RUNAWAY SLAVES</p> <p>Runaway slaves were clearly 'a troublesome preoccupation throughout the ancient Near East' for all the cuneiform codes deal with this problem. It was 'not just a question of property - although it was also that' - but one 'which upset the balance of the social order as a whole'. In sharp contrast, the only reference in the Old Testament is at Deut 23. 15-16, which, considering that slavery was lawful in Israel, must refer to foreign slaves taking refuge in Israel. Such a slave was not to be returned and must be given the right to settle where he pleased. This is radically different from the provisions of the Code of Hammurabi, for instance, which prescribe the death penalty for anyone assisting the escape of a slave.</p>	<p>Boecker associates this Israelite treatment of runaway slaves with the characteristic biblical attitude to aliens, e.g. an alien is equal before the law to an Israelite (Deut 1.16; 10.18-19, 14.29 et al.)<sup>928</sup></p>
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Boecker here identifies a characteristic biblical attitude to aliens<sup>929</sup> but he makes no attempt to identify from what it sprang. However, it is only too clear that it could not possibly have resulted from revisionist thinking since the one thing we know for certain about P and his friends is their common desire to rid the community of foreign elements.<sup>930</sup> This makes Boecker's 'characteristic biblical attitude to aliens' one of the best proofs of the existence of the god-of-the-marginals ideology since it is an attitude which is not only inimical to post-exilic Israelite society but also something unheard of in ancient civilisations as a whole, where foreigners unprotected by treaties were considered fair game. Indeed, recent events linked to the war against terrorism lead one to suspect that in spite of thousands of years of humanising effort the attitude of civilisation towards foreigners remains today basically unchanged.<sup>931</sup> So once again we are forced to conclude that we are dealing here with an idea that stems from Israel's 'revolutionary' ideology. One often hears it said that Israel demonstrated her special ethic in the attention she paid to the welfare of the widow and orphan. In fact, of course, there was nothing special in this since the protection of the weak and disadvantaged, as represented by the widow and the orphan, was considered the special

<sup>928</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.86-87.

<sup>929</sup> The prescription [concerning the foreign run-away slave who must not be returned in Deut 23.15-16] belongs to the great number of OT and in particular Deuteronomistic principles designed to protect the alien who himself has no rights.' Boecker, *Law* p. 86-7.

<sup>930</sup> Ezra 4. 1-3; 9-10. Neh 10. 28-31; 13. 28-30.

<sup>931</sup> I am thinking of the United States' exportation of foreigners suspected of terrorism to states which have not signed up to the convention against torture just so that information may be extracted from them in this barbaric manner, and of their imprisonment of such people in their Guantanamo base in Cuba so that they may be kept there indefinitely without trial and without breaking American law. I am also thinking of our own government's vain attempts to change the law so as to deprive foreigners suspected of terrorism of their legal rights.

responsibility of all centrarchical rulers in the ancient Near East, as their law codes bear witness.<sup>932</sup> What was unique in Israel's attitude was not this feature but rather the regard shown for the rights of the *foreigner*, an idea that can only be explained as stemming from the god-of-the-marginals ideology.

<p>THE DUTIES OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS TO KING AND COUNTRY</p> <p>Although such duties undoubtedly applied in Israel there is no hint of them in the biblical codes, unlike the Code of Hammurabi.</p>	<p>'The state is not a preoccupation of O.T. law.'<sup>933</sup></p>
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Boecker is surely right in saying that the state is not a preoccupation of O.T. law. However, it is odd that he gives no explanation as to why this is the case. In the biblical story (whether we take this as an historical account or simply as a literary product) the state in the form of the monarchy is not presented as intrinsic to the life of the community but rather as an afterthought imposed as a result of an historical compromise. This in itself suggests that if the state is not a preoccupation of O.T. law it is because it constitutes a civilisation-concern and not an aspect of reality which marginals characteristically focus on. In other words, from the point of view of the god-of-the-marginals ideology the state, whether it is considered as beneficial or harmful, is always a secondary consideration. In P's revisionist pattern of thought, where the Davidic dynasty is claimed as divinely ordained and established in perpetuity by the metacosmic god, the state is clearly seen as a primary matter. I conclude therefore that what we are presented with here can only be further evidence of an underlying 'revolutionary' ethic.

<p>RENTING LAND</p> <p>'The renting of land was extremely common throughout the ancient Near East' and the Code of Hammurabi does not fail to provide for it. However, there is no hint of it in Israel. The Old Testament 'has so much on land and things connected with the land that it is almost inconceivable that only rent is accidentally omitted. In other words, according to Old Testament law there should be no renting out of land.'<sup>934</sup></p>	<p>The absence of the practice of renting land implies that land-ownership was not an unlimited right. The land was Yahweh's, not the occupier's (Lev.25.23). It was for the <i>use</i> of families or clans, not their ultimate <i>possession</i>. Hence the year of Jubilee, in which alienated land was to be returned - 'the restoration of people to land as originally intended'. Leaving the land fallow in the seventh year was also an indication that the holder was 'not fully the owner of the land which he held in fee from Yahweh'.<sup>935</sup></p>
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It is interesting to note that in the revisionist text in Genesis 47. 13-26, presumably written by one of P's friends, Joseph is seen as nationalising the means of production in Egypt including, of course, the land. This suggests that revisionist thinking in post-exilic Israel approved a policy of land nationalisation. It could be argued, therefore, that the absence of the practice of renting land simply resulted from the desire of the priestly administrators of post-exilic Judah to restrict the way in which the strong always tend to monopolize the means of production. This would put the policy on a par with Sabbath

<sup>932</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.54,57,75,76.

<sup>933</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.87.

<sup>934</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.89.

<sup>935</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp. 90-92.

observance and the Levitical instructions to allow land to lie fallow on the seventh year, to observe the year of Jubilee, and to refrain from reaping fields to the very borders.<sup>936</sup> As I have said none of these practices – all of which are civilisation-ordinances firmly associated with the work of P and his friends – can be directly related to the god-of-the-marginals idea. However, Boecker argues, to the contrary, that the absence of laws dealing with the renting of land implies that land was seen not as *a possession* but rather as something belonging to Yahweh and provided by him *for use*. He is surely right, for if we were dealing with a policy of land nationalisation it would certainly have been stated that the renting of land was illegal, given that the proprietor was God (i.e. the state). What we have here is an absence of legislation in the Israelite codes. This strongly suggests that we have to do here with a ‘revolutionary’ ethic based on the Yahwist’s god-of-the-marginals ideology in which the land represented the terrain on which a demonstration of living in radical solidarity was to take place. Obviously, renting land under such circumstances was out of the question, making a law against it otiose.

<p>THE GORING OX</p> <p>In the cuneiform codes (of Hammurabi and Eshnunna) the ox that gores someone to death, ‘though the actual offender, is ignored, while the owner of the ox is fined.’ In the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21.28-32) the owner may be fined or even put to death, depending on the circumstances, but the ox must always be stoned to death.</p>	<p>Whereas the cuneiform codes reflect the economic interests involved, the offence being seen as essentially society-centred, the Book of the Covenant regards it as a crime that is religious in nature and against God. In killing a human being the ox has ‘objectively committed a de facto insurrection against the hierarchic order established by Creation.’<sup>937</sup> That the ox should die by stoning also emphasizes the significance of its ‘crime’.</p>
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I agree with Finklestein that the Book of the Covenant finds the ox who commits manslaughter guilty of a Category One crime against God though, of course, I see the crime as ideological not religious. It is not that stoning, as opposed to other forms of execution, carries ideological significance. Stoning was in fact the normal means of carrying out the death sentence.<sup>938</sup> It is rather that in Biblical codes the death penalty is reserved *exclusively* for Category One sin (Finklestein’s ‘religious sin against God’). It seems that what we are coming up against here is the revisionist ideology of P and his friends which finds the goring ox guilty of the destruction of the *imago dei* and hence, as Finklestein says, of ‘insurrection against the hierarchical order established by Creation’.

<p>THE PROHIBITION OF IMAGES</p> <p>The Old Testament ‘prohibition of images has no parallel in the history of religion.’ ‘It is extraordinarily widely attested in the Old Testament, not least in the various codes.</p>	<p>This prohibition does not reflect any spiritual/material opposition - which has no place in Israelite thinking - but rather the conviction that Yahweh is not manipulatable. It arises from ‘an anti-Canaanite bias’ in the newly formed agricultural communities of Israel. It establishes that Yahweh is utterly distinct from the world; he is in no way immanent in it but ‘stands over against it as the one who acts in history.’<sup>939</sup></p>
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<sup>936</sup> Lev23. 22-32.

<sup>937</sup> J.J. Finkelstein quoted by Walton, *Ancient* pp. 79-80.

<sup>938</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.39.

<sup>939</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.145 –147.

I am happy with Boecker's conclusion that Israel's extraordinary and unprecedented prohibition of images stemmed from her anti-Canaanite conviction that Yahweh was not manipulatable ... except that I see this anti-Canaanite conviction as being *ideological* not *religious*. This may seem a slight distinction but, of course, it changes everything. As I see it Canaanite does not stand for *agricultural paganism*, and anti-Canaanite for *nomadic, god-of-history Yahwism*. All of that stuff is nineteenth century invention. For me, Canaanite stands for *a centrarchival, survival-of-the-fittest*<sup>940</sup> *ideology* as pictured in your manipulatable and cosmic Marduks and Baals, whereas anti-Canaanite stands for *the 'revolutionary' ideology* as pictured in the unmanipulatable and metacosmic god of the marginals, who, unlike the high-gods of the ancient Near East, is characteristically immanent not transcendent.<sup>941</sup> Consequently, it seems to me that what we have here in the prohibition of images is a product of the god-of-the-marginals ideology.

<p>THE LAW OF THE ALTAR</p> <p>There are no laws about altars in the cuneiform codes. Ex 20.24-26 prescribes 1) an altar of earth is to be erected for sacrifice, 2) an altar of hewn stone is forbidden, 3) there must be no cult on a stepped altar. The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12.2-7), on the other hand, demands the complete destruction of all pre-existing Canaanite cultic centres and their altars and the centralization of Israel's cult at one unspecified sanctuary.</p>	<p>As with the prohibition of images Israelite laws concerning altars are designed to challenge Canaanite practice. The three provisions in Exodus amount to a prohibition of anything redolent of foreign cults. Altars must not be made from worked stone because Canaanite rites took place at altars of hewn stone into which 'bowl-holes' had been chiselled, for blood or libations. Stepped altars also would reflect heathen practice. Boecker plays down the suggestion of a sexual taboo in the prohibition of steps, which other scholars have emphasized.<sup>942</sup> For him the Deuteronomic code's stronger anti-Canaanite tone reflects 'historical experience and theological reflection.'<sup>943</sup></p>
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The anti-Canaanite aspect of these altar laws is all too obvious. However, once again, Boecker understands them religiously rather than ideologically, as directed against 'foreign' cults rather than against 'centrarchival survival-of-the-fittest' cults. This gives them an ethnic colour quite at odds with his own remark about the great number of OT principles designed to protect the alien.<sup>944</sup> Since it was not easy to indicate the ideological character of the underlying struggle with the Canaanites in cultic practices – after all, one sacrifice looks much like another to the outside observer – the author of the Book of the Covenant attempts to draw attention to it by using the sex-marker technique. He highlights the utterly disgusting ideological aspect of the Canaanite cultic practices by suggesting that in having steps of polished stone leading up to their altars the priests, who didn't wear underpants, exposed their genitals to all and sundry, or if not to all and sundry then at least to God! If it is granted that these laws concerning altars are concerned with ideological and not religious differences then they have to be

<sup>940</sup> This is not a nineteenth century idea as some might think, as I have already pointed out!

<sup>941</sup> Boecker makes the common mistake of seeing Yahweh as transcendent because he is unable to distinguish between the transcendent and the metacosmic.

<sup>942</sup> Boecker, *Law* pp.147-150.

<sup>943</sup> Boecker, *Law* p.185.

<sup>944</sup> See p. 270 note 929 above.

the product of the god-of-the-marginals ideology since post-exilic revisionism, for its part, was anti-Canaanite for religious not ideological reasons.

<p>CIVIL LAW/ CULTIC LAW</p> <p>The predominant concern of Mesopotamian codes is civil law: property rights and the ‘proper procedures governing commerce and economic life in general’.<sup>945</sup> The biblical codes are largely indifferent to these. In addition, the latter emphasize religious or ‘cultic’ considerations which are absent in the cuneiform codes.</p>	<p>In Mesopotamia ‘offence is ultimately viewed in relation to society’ while in Israel law is revelatory in origin,<sup>946</sup> and all offence is ultimately against God.<sup>947</sup></p>
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Walton seems to suggest that in contrast to the Mesopotamian codes the Bible adopts a religious (ideological?) position *vis-à-vis* criminal offences and that in this respect the Mesopotamian codes are, in Finklestein’s words, barbaric and primitive:

It is rather the all but universal primitive practice of treating physical assaults, including homicide, as private civic invasions remediable by pecuniary satisfaction, which far from preserving any moral - and therefore criminal - issue in such acts, is the truly ‘barbaric’ situation.<sup>948</sup>

Given the relative sophistication of the Mesopotamian societies this is hard to credit. What we have to remember is that the Mesopotamian rulers operated from a dominant and therefore ideologically unchallenged position. In other words they wrote their codes knowing that everyone who mattered who read them would concur with their ideological position, taking it for granted. Consequently it is hardly surprising that such codes display a cool (apparently unideological), functional approach - one which Davies finds ethically preferable and Finklestein barbaric! The Israelites, on the contrary, as a revolutionary society of marginals surrounded by ideological enemies, characteristically wrote defensively, imbuing everything they wrote - even their law codes - with the resonances of their antipathetic ideological position. This is why crimes are often seen as offences against Yahweh himself. Though the concrete evidence is lacking one has to assume that mad attacks on centrarchal society (such as Moses’ murder of the Egyptian task master) would also have been condemned by the Centrarchs in similar terms - as Category One offences against their gods. But for obvious reasons we would not expect these rulers to find a place in their codes to denounce such aberrant, marginal behaviour. Consequently, I find it quite unsafe for Finklestein to suggest, as he does, that ‘the evidence strongly indicates that Mesopotamian legal thinking was not conscious of any categorical gulf between various classes of wrongs’.<sup>949</sup> It is simply that what they would have considered as Category One ideological wrongs were not given the opportunity to figure on the visible social landscape.

<sup>945</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p.78.

<sup>946</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p.75.

<sup>947</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p.80.

<sup>948</sup> Finklestein as quoted by Walton, *Ancient* p.80.

<sup>949</sup> Finklestein, *The Ox that Gored, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia, 1981) p.41 as quoted by Walton *Ancient* p. 88.



Judging by the above analysis Israel's idiosyncrasy, identified in this so-called contrast between civil and cultic law, was due to ideological rather than religious factors. Mesopotamian law was not backward (or forward for that matter) in lacking a religious or cultic reference as Finklestein (or Davies) maintains. Nor was Israelite law advanced because of special revelations the community had supposedly received, as Walton seems to believe.<sup>950</sup> Rather Israel's specialness *mainly* had to do with her unique god-of-the-marginals approach. As she saw it centrarchical, survival-of-the-fittest attitudes to life in all their various shapes and forms critically undermined radical solidarity, the corner stone on which she built her public life. Having said that we can never altogether discount the possibility that a few identified differences may indeed be religious, having to do with the effect on the community of the priestly revisionists' matacosmic god. However, we have so far only come across one or two of these.

## 2. Differences in the codes as regards form

<p>Cuneiform laws are essentially casuistic in form i.e. defined in terms of the consequences which follow from specified examples of behaviour, as punishments or penalties. Such laws are 'strictly pragmatic...quite independent <i>per se</i> of any religious doctrine or ethical principle.'<sup>951</sup></p> <p>Biblical law is essentially apodictic, i.e. it prohibits certain actions or attitudes. Consequences (punishments or penalties) may or may not be stated but are not of the essence, as in casuistic law.</p>	<p>Especially in Deuteronomy the apodictic character of Israelite law takes the form of 'address and exhortation'. Law 'has been finally shot through with theology'.<sup>952</sup></p> <p>There is also a suggestion by Mendenhall that the Decalogue's commandments resemble the apodictic stipulations in treaties common at the time, the inference being that the Israelites saw their law in the form of a treaty drawn up between God and his people.<sup>953</sup></p>
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Boecker claims that in the Israelite codes, and especially that of Deuteronomy, law 'has been finally shot through with theology' but what does this mean? Theology is a tricky word since it can stand for both ideology and religious doctrine. If Boecker means that the Israelite laws were more culturally advanced because of some special revelation which Israel had received direct from heaven then he is merely speculating because revelations of that kind are not historical processes that can in principle be verified. If, on the other hand, he means that these laws were indelibly coloured with a special ideology then we can of course agree, but this is not saying much. For all laws are ideological, even those which simply presuppose an ideology, so everything depends on what the special ideology was. In her laws Israel certainly put her ideology to the fore but what ideology was it? The idiosyncrasy of Israelite law in its apodictic form is certainly very striking. Mendenhall's thesis that this imperative form was probably borrowed from the treaty language current in the ancient near east is intriguing. It certainly seems to suggest that an ideological, covenantal relationship between Israel

<sup>950</sup> '...those elements of law that constituted Israel's uniqueness would have the first claim for being understood as deriving from divine revelation.' Walton, *Ancient* p. 75.

<sup>951</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p.80.

<sup>952</sup> Boecker *Law* p.186.

<sup>953</sup> Walton *Ancient* p.82.

and her god was the presupposition on which her laws were based but of itself it indicates nothing as regards the nature of the ideology in question. So we can all agree that Israel put her ideology to the fore and that the Mesopotamian law-givers preferred a cooler approach. But why was Israel so aggressive in her ideological stance? Since it is characteristically revolutionaries, not revisionists, who adopt a pugnacious ideological approach we should surely attribute the apodictic form to the followers of the god of the marginals. After all their revisionist rivals, as centrachs themselves, would naturally have produced codes resembling those produced by the Mesopotamian law-givers.

### 3. Differences in the codes as regards function

<p>Mesopotamian lawcodes serve essentially to <i>describe</i> the well-ordered society and its norms rather than to establish or represent a moral order. They express the king's intentions, set out, as it were, before his god. This is how civilization is to be maintained and protected. Offences are against the well-ordering and smooth-running of society and, as such, are seen mainly in economic terms, even where personal injury is involved.</p> <p>Israelite law, on the other hand 'displays a concern that goes beyond the economic, enveloping all aspects of community life and incorporating both the strictly cultic/sacral and that which remains outside it.'<sup>954</sup> Its function is to apply to every aspect of life and behaviour the standard of morality.</p>	<p>The Mesopotamian ideal was a well-ordered society. .. Law is prescriptive only to the extent of requiring a person to conform his actions to what is necessary for civilized society. It is amoral, i.e., there is no moral absolute that serves as the foundation of behaviour. The gods are not moral, and the system does not require morality per se, only justice.<sup>955</sup></p> <p>In Israel, law represents the demands of Deity on his people. ... while morality was considered universally applicable, the law was not. ... The law is not YHWH's demands of anyone else - only of Israel. This law, however, was based on absolutes, for the standard was YHWH himself - "You are to be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 19.2). In Israelite law, then, all legislation is, at heart, religious for morality has its ramifications in every aspect of society.<sup>956</sup></p>
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Walton makes an issue of the fact that in Israel the law was only seen as applying to Israelites. In fact, of course, all the Mesopotamian codes were clearly devised for internal consumption. This means that we cannot use this fact as a distinguishing feature of law in Israel. You may think that this is nit-picking but it is an important point since Walton's whole thesis depends on his ability to establish that Israel was aware of two sorts of morality: ordinary morality which was universally applicable and a morality of absolutes which was only applicable to Israel herself. While it seems more than probable that, like everyone else in the ancient Near East, the Israelites considered the standards within their community to be superior to and more exigent than those pertaining in the outside world, this does *not* indicate that they saw the difference in terms of *absolute* as over against *ordinary* standards. Furthermore there is no use in pointing to the quotation from Leviticus 19.2 for a justification of this distinction. All the peoples of the ancient Near East called their gods and goddesses holy, since the word (qadosh) was simply used to indicate that which was characteristic of deity.<sup>957</sup> Thus everything pertaining to a god or goddess was automatically designated as holy,

<sup>954</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p. 88.

<sup>955</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p. 88.

<sup>956</sup> Walton, *Ancient* p. 90.

<sup>957</sup> See article on Holiness in Hastings dictionary of the Bible p. 356.

including the land and people over which he or she presided. Neither in Mesopotamian usage nor in that pertaining in the Bible is there the slightest hint that the word holy was employed to indicate either a specific characteristic or the distinction between something absolute and something ordinary.

That said, it is certain that the Israelites and the other peoples in the ancient Near East envisaged 'the holy' differently since the word tended to be coloured by the characteristics of the deity in question. In other words the term was employed as an empty vessel into which the user poured the ideological characteristics of his or her god or goddess. This means that it is no more true to suggest that the Mesopotamians were *amoral*, in the sense of having no moral absolutes, than it is to suggest that the Israelites were *moral*, in the sense of having moral absolutes. In fact, just a little bit of thought should be sufficient to make one realize that the stances of the Mesopotamians and Israelites must have been *equally* ideological and so *equally* moral, only the morals would have been different. In Mesopotamia the ideology was cosmic and so the salient features in the Mesopotamian standard of morality were such things as success, strength, control, intelligence, cunning, heroism, justice, mercy and love etc. In Israel the ideology was metacosmic and so the salient features in the Israelite standard of morality were such things as love, solidarity, mercy, righteousness, freedom, heroism, intelligence, strength etc. And don't be confused by the fact that I have placed several characteristics in both groups - though in different positions. It should be clear by now that I see cosmic love and heroism as very different qualities from their metacosmic counterparts.

Though Walton couldn't be more wrong in supposing that the Israelite codes differed from their Mesopotamian counterparts in functioning as an absolute standard of behaviour, a remarkable functional difference does exist, though it quite escapes his notice. This difference resides in the fact that whereas the Mesopotamian lawgivers were quite unconcerned to motivate people by their codes, the apodictic biblical laws exhibit a pronounced exhortational approach - a fact that Boecker rightly stresses. Thus, while almost every biblical law is clearly designed to motivate people with the god-of-the-marginals ideology, the only way the Hammurabi code shows any concern at all about the way in which people will react to its judgements is when it suggests that oppressed members of the community, on reading the code, should realise that their ruler already has their interests at heart and has done the necessary:

Let any oppressed man who has cause come into the presence of the statue of me, the king of justice, and then read carefully my inscribed Stella, and give heed to my precious words, and may my Stella make the case clear to him; may he understand his cause; may he set his mind at ease!<sup>958</sup>

It is not difficult to provide an explanation for this remarkable difference. Centrarchical society required ordinary people to concentrate their efforts on the business of wealth production and to leave all other initiatives in the hands of the rulers. Consequently there was no incentive for people like Hammurabi to motivate his subjects. Indeed it would have been counterproductive, raising peoples' personal expectations and making it more likely that they would dare to find occasions on which to take matters into their own hands. Of course it was important for rulers to motivate people to produce wealth

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<sup>958</sup> ANET p.178.

but that was best achieved, as it is today, by means of economic carrots and sticks and not by passing the initiative into their hands. Israel, on the other hand, as a community of marginals had no centre on which to rely. This would have made it extremely important for the people to be strongly motivated if the community were to have any chances of surviving in a hostile political environment. Even later on, when with the introduction of the kingship a centre of sorts was established, it would still have been necessary for the people to remain motivated since whatever the king was in Israel he was no absolute monarch on the centrarchical pattern. This accounts for the prophets' insistence that though Israel's rulers were especially at fault for the failure of the community *it was none the less the whole community that bore overall responsibility.*

Hear what the Lord says:

“Arise, plead your case before the mountains,  
And let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,  
And you enduring foundations of the earth;  
For the Lord has a controversy with his people,  
And he will contend with Israel.

O my people what have I done to you?  
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!”<sup>959</sup>

### *Conclusion*

What I take from this brief, comparative survey of the biblical and Mesopotamian law codes is that Davies' contention that there was little difference between the Hebrew ethic and that of the surrounding civilizations is unsustainable. In fact it seems that the Israelites had a very idiosyncratic ethic, one that was not in the least bit like any other found in the ancient Near East, for it was shot through with her 'revolutionary', metacosmic-god-of-the-marginals ideology. That said, it is of course perfectly true that the Israelites shared the basic ethical principles common to humanity. It would have been altogether shocking and unbelievable if they had not, for no one has seriously suggested they came from outer space!

### *The Idiosyncrasy of the Hebrew Ethic as Expressed in their Peculiar Use of Words*

We civilization-folk seldom realize that our ethics are built into the very vocabulary we use for describing what happens in the world about us. But marginals, for their part, are only too conscious of it since they are obliged to wrestle with our biased vocabulary when trying to describe the same things we see from their own very different perspective. I have already raised this problem when talking about sex in the biblical stories. Like us, the civilization-folk in the ancient Near East had no great use for an ideological vocabulary since they experienced no need to talk about different viewpoints. After all, their ideology was dominant so they simply assumed its 'truths'. In their opinion it was the natural way of seeing things. They didn't speak about people having different ideological perspectives. They simply classified those who did not automatically accept their own viewpoint as wicked and had them dispatched. But the Hebrews were forced to develop a way of talking about ideology, since for them everything depended on being able to speak about what happened in the world

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<sup>959</sup> Micah 6.1-2.

*differently* from the civilisation-folk who had colluded in their trashing. As I have previously pointed out, in their place we would probably have invented a whole new vocabulary, much in the way that Marxism did in the last century. Their own approach was to invent new symbolic representations, the most important of which was the sex marker. But though this was a great tool for describing what they saw as the ideological perversions of civilization-folk it was no good for setting out their own, very different, Hebrew ethic. So the biblical writers were obliged to involve themselves in an ideological and linguistic struggle over all of the important ethical words in the 'normal' civilisation-vocabulary; they needed to make all these words mean something significantly different. We have already mentioned some of these words in passing.<sup>960</sup> Here we will consider a set of important words: justice, righteousness and mercy.

### *The Pattern of Justice, Righteousness and Mercy in Civilisation.*

#### Justice:

A human community is made up of people with different interests and pursuits which naturally bring them into conflict during the ordinary course of events. Such conflicts serve to fragment the community, which means that ways have to be found of dealing with them. This can be achieved in different ways:

1. By policing with brute force.
2. Through party politics (negotiations between groups from positions of strength),
3. Through a system of justice (a blind, even-handed evaluation of what is right according to some previously defined code).

It is generally reckoned that this list constitutes an ascending order of sophistication: resolving disputes by party politics being a social advance on resolving them by brute force, and resolving them by a judicial process more civilised than resolving them in accordance with the prevailing balance of power. In other words it is recognised that justice in the form of equity constitutes the highest principle of order in civilisation and that the dispensing of justice is in consequence one of the chief preoccupations and prerogatives of the ruler and of his or her god. It may of course be argued that there is not a great deal of equity visible in our bourgeois society and even less in feudalism. However, we are not concerned here with the delivery of justice but in justice as an aspiration and, though it is certainly true that feudalism did not concern itself with establishing equity between classes, it did see the need for equity within them, and this too is a concern of the ancient Near Eastern codes.

#### Righteousness:

If justice in society means the 'blind', even-handed and equitable treatment of those within the same class and a codified and therefore equitable reckoning of punishments between and within classes,<sup>961</sup> righteousness for its part means the proper delivery of this justice by the community's officers, the god, the rulers, judges and local magistrates, right the way down to the ordinary citizen.

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<sup>960</sup> See p. 277 above.

<sup>961</sup> By this I mean that any commoner would receive *the same* punishment for a given offence committed against another commoner and *the same* though increased punishment for the same offence committed against a noble.

Mercy:

Now, even though justice and righteousness in the form of equity is considered by civilisation folk to be an absolute priority, without which no human community can flourish, it is none the less recognised that a mindless application of equity – an eye for an eye – can be intolerably harsh even though impeccably just. If, for example, you accidentally kill *my* son is it right that justice should blindly take *your* son and give him to me to do as I liked as restitution? For this reason it has always been understood that the social officer, whether god, ruler or judge, has the right and even obligation to temper justice with mercy. In this regard it has often been implied that in advocating mercy Israel was promoting a new idea; but this is not necessarily<sup>962</sup> the case, for mercy was always part and parcel of the pattern of justice in ancient Near Eastern civilisations.

*The Pattern of Justice, Righteousness and Mercy as Seen by the Marginal.*

Though justice is a fine instrument for regulating disputes within a community it is of little use to those who find themselves excluded from it. For though it may be true to say that some people end up as marginals through social injustice, for others the critical factor is sheer misfortune, whereas, in other cases still, it is a direct result of their own behaviour. And in any event, whatever the truth may be, the justice-qualified-by-mercy of civilisation folk will not restore what the marginal has lost: a place within human society. For dustbinned people this kind of justice is an irrelevance since it was on its terms (whether well or badly administered) that their unbearable fate was sealed. It is because of blind justice that they have now become Cain wandering about in the land of Nod: that twilight world which is both nowhere and everywhere, where nothing ever happens and there is no getting out once you are in. *The mere experience of this predicament renders immaterial the question who or what was responsible for bringing it about. Here there is only one truth staring the marginal in the face: the fact that it is SOLIDARITY not JUSTICE which properly holds human communities together and which makes life for everyone within them worthwhile.*<sup>963</sup> This fundamental truth, which because of their situation marginals cannot avoid seeing, is something which we civilisation-folk, because of our very different situation, habitually conspire both individually and collectively to ignore. The result is that if we ever catch ourselves inadvertently glimpsing it – and it is such a obvious truth that no one can possibly go through their life without sometime becoming aware of it – we immediately find a good excuse to banish it from our thoughts.

*The Pattern of Justice, Righteousness and Mercy in Hebrew Scripture.*

Being civilisation-folk we naturally tend to read this group of important words in the Hebrew scriptures: *mishpat*, *sadaqa* and *hesed*, with the perspective of the ‘normal’ equity pattern rather than the *solidarity* one. This of course means that we understand very little – or, perhaps more precisely, only what we want to! What we don’t generally

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<sup>962</sup> I say ‘necessarily’ because in fact I believe Israel was introducing a new idea but it wasn’t mercy as understood here. See directly below.

<sup>963</sup> A fundamental truth upon which the entire Bible is based for even the Priestly texts, in attempting to bury it, demonstrate its control.

see is that for the Hebrew marginals justice and mercy were not independent virtues, the second modifying the first basic principle of equity by softening and humanising it. For them, justice and mercy were rather one and the same thing, being simply different ways of expressing the idea of *solidarity*. It has to be noted that the idea we are talking about here is not the *class solidarity* of Marxism or even the *republican solidarity* of the French revolution – where everyone was considered as a fellow citizen.<sup>964</sup> For the Hebrews, this whole justice/mercy/righteousness pattern of thought meant a covenant commitment to everyone within the community – extending also to other creatures and even to the land itself. And this idea, while by no means a social creation, was emphatically an awareness that stemmed from their own dustbinning. As Jesus remarked ‘You marginals are blessed, for the kingdom is yours.’<sup>965</sup>

However, when reading the Hebrew texts, it is not enough simply to swap patterns and understand the words *mishpat*, *sadaqa* and *hesed*, whenever they occur, in terms of ‘human solidarity’ instead of as ‘equity modified by mercy’. The reason for this is that the Hebrews were clearly *a community* of former marginals and as such, like any other society, they naturally experienced the need for a judicial structure of equity. So we are *not* dealing here with a straightforward alternative, either/or situation (which would have made things so much easier and clearer for us as modern readers) but with a highly complicated, sometimes either/or, sometimes both/and duality. We shall examine this important duality, a crucial feature of the Hebrew predicament, more fully, immediately below. Here I simply wish to demonstrate its existence. Take this fascinating text, which constitutes Yahweh’s ‘self disclosure’ at the ceremony when he instituted his covenant with his people. Given the context, its importance can hardly be overstated.<sup>966</sup>

‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.’<sup>967</sup>

The interesting thing about this self disclosure is that it looks as if it has been constructed on the usual civilisation pattern ... except that it has been presented back-to-front. Normally,<sup>968</sup> the dominant principle of equity is presented first. This is then modified by introducing the secondary principle of mercy. Here, on the contrary we have mercy (carefully spelled out as solidarity – i.e. from the perspective of the marginal<sup>969</sup>) presented as the dominant principle and this is then modified in a secondary fashion by equity! This switch can hardly have been accidental. Indeed the more you contemplate it the more you realise what a colossal ideological shift it brings about, wouldn’t you say?

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<sup>964</sup> The word itself appeared, as far as I can make out, as part of the burgeoning revolutionary vocabulary of nineteenth century France.

<sup>965</sup> Lk 6.20 in which ‘the poor’ is better translated as ‘the destitute’, i.e. those who have effectively fallen out of the net.

<sup>966</sup> Indeed the text is repeated again in Num 14.18 and Deut 7.9-10.

<sup>967</sup> Ex 34.6-7.

<sup>968</sup> i.e. in accordance with the civilisation pattern.

<sup>969</sup> See Deut 7.7-8 ‘It was not because you were more in number than other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of the peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.’

What is noticeable is that this (from the civilisation point of view) quite unheard-of principle of solidarity becomes most apparent in those texts in which the biblical writers appear to be pulling out all the ideological stops:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Amos 5.23-4.

Hear, you heads of Jacob  
and rulers of the house of Israel!  
Is it not for you to know justice? –  
You who hate the good and love the evil,  
who tear the skin from off my people,  
and the flesh from off their bones ... Mic 3.1-2.

In these prophecies Amos and Micah are surely not criticising Israel simply for failing to install and maintain a civilised system of equity. Nor, surely, are the following two prophets simply trying to persuade her to make the necessary systemic reforms:

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
And those in her who repent, by righteousness. Is 1.27

He has showed you. O man, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness'  
and to walk humbly with your God? Mic 6.8

Isn't it obvious in fact that all three prophets are urging on the community (and especially her rulers) a drastic change of heart (ideological view or spirit) calling on them to return to the original Hebrew perspective where solidarity, not equity, was the fundamental guiding principle ... though of course this change does not imply the abandonment of the need for a proper system of equity in full working order?

Scholars have carefully noted the way in which biblical writers exert a peculiar strain on these words *mishpat*, *sadaqa* and *hesed*, taken from the 'normal' language of the ancient Near East.<sup>970</sup> However, being civilization folk, they seldom if ever recognise where this strain comes from. They do not see that it results from the Hebrew writers' struggles to wrench the language from its civilization controls and force it to disclose their most unusual, marginal perspective.<sup>971</sup>

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<sup>970</sup> e.g. Von Rad, *Genesis* p. 120, Robert Davidson pp. 78, 134,

<sup>971</sup> See for example Robert Davidson, *The Old Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964) 'These two words, justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*sadaqa*) echo in one form or another across the teaching of all the great prophetic figures in the Old Testament. This does not mean that the prophets of the eighth century B.C. onwards suddenly gave a new moral content to the religion of the Hebrews. In themselves the words are curiously ambiguous in content. Taken together and read in the light of the religious pilgrimage of the Hebrew people, they point us to that correct ordering of society which is alone consistent with the claim to be the people of Yahweh.' p. 78. 'The Hebrew word *hesed* translated 'mercy' in the A.V., 'steadfast love' in the R.S.V., is notoriously difficult to render adequately in English. At the heart of it there is the thought of loyalty and dependability, such loyalty as you have the right to expect from someone united to you by a covenant (Cf. 2 Sam. 10. 1-2 where David promises to 'do *hesed*', to deal loyalty with Hanun the new king of the Ammonites, as Nahash, Hanun's father had dealt loyalty with David). Yet there is perhaps more in *hesed* than loyalty, especially when the word is applied to



*The Dualistic Nature of the Hebrew Ethic:  
Poles Held in Tension?*

Up to this point we have treated the Hebrew ethic as if it constituted an identifiable unity. However, the truth is that scholars nowadays tend to highlight the fact that the Bible appears to speak with a divided tongue on most matters, including ethical behaviour. In considering this question of the apparent *dualistic* nature of the Hebrew ethic we will be tracking Walter Brueggemann in our usual critical manner.

*Common theology versus embrace of pain*

In his book *‘Old Testament Theology’*<sup>972</sup> Brueggemann claims that the Hebrew ethic is based on a bipolar arrangement in which one pole is seen to operate as a corrective of the other. He builds on the notion of a common theology, by which he means a religious contractual approach to ethics commonly adopted throughout the ancient Near East.<sup>973</sup> According to Morton Smith, who first defined the term,<sup>974</sup> this ‘common theology’ is characteristically concerned with a just, merciful and all-powerful deity who is in charge of all history, nature and morality and it consists in the contract made by this deity with his or her people to define what is good and bad conduct and to reward and punish human behaviour accordingly. Using this principle Brueggemann presents the first volley of his general thesis thus: The first pole of the Old Testament faith consists of this *common theology*. It represents the Old Testament faith as it functions ‘above the fray’ (or ‘in the realm of abstract principles’ as I myself would put it) unaffected by social and historical processes.

The problem presented by this first pole, as Brueggemann sees it, is that a use of the common theology tends to lead one to marginalize people who for one reason or another fail to live up to it. Given the Hebrew’s experience as a community of marginals rescued from Egypt this made it necessary for the development of a second pole within the Old Testament faith which Brueggemann describes as the *embrace of pain*. This second pole represents the Old Testament faith as it functions ‘within the fray’ (or ‘having regard to social and historical practicalities’ as I would say).<sup>975</sup> For Brueggemann these two poles operate in tension, which means that we are not free to resolve the issue by dispensing with either of them.<sup>976</sup> In other words we are presented with a duality, for though the Old Testament clearly distances itself from the common theology of the ancient near east, it is nonetheless shackled to it. As he himself puts it ‘Old Testament theology fully partakes in the *common theology* of its world and yet struggles to be free of that same theology’.<sup>977</sup>

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Yahweh. What brought the covenant between Yahweh and his people into being in the first place if not the unmerited, outgoing love of Yahweh? What could keep Yahweh loyal to that same covenant in face of his people’s disloyalty if not that same love? ‘Steadfast love’ or ‘loving dependability’ is, therefore, perhaps as near as we can get to the meaning of *hesed* when applied to God. This is the bed rock of faith for the Old Testament.

<sup>972</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

<sup>973</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.5f.

<sup>974</sup> Morton Smith, *The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East* JBL 7 (1952) pp 35-47.

<sup>975</sup> ‘from “underneath” the processes of social interaction and conflict.’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p.4.

<sup>976</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.5.

<sup>977</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.4.

In thus speaking of two realms witnessed to by the biblical material, one being concerned with matters *within the fray* and the other with matters *above it*, Brueggemann seems to be advocating that there are two perfectly legitimate ways of viewing the Bible, both of which have to be given proper consideration. One approach has regard to the Bible's witness to social and historical realities (e.g. Gottwald's book *The Tribes of Israel*) and the other has regard to its witness to basic human thought forms (e.g. Child's book *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*).<sup>978</sup> In maintaining such a position Brueggemann doesn't mean it to be understood that he sees one approach as political and the other as religious for he makes it abundantly plain that, as he sees it, *both* approaches are intrinsically political.<sup>979</sup> Indeed, Brueggemann is one of a growing number of scholars who clearly recognise the essentially political nature of the faith expressed within the Jewish Bible. This then is the first volley of Brueggemann's thesis.

*Iconic versus aniconic religion.*

Brueggemann works out his second volley using the terminology of *iconic* and *aniconic* religion. He explains that in iconic religion as witnessed to in Egypt, Babylon, and all the other empires surrounding Israel, deity loses its intrinsic freedom and becomes located in an object (idol) or place (temple) where it can be controlled.<sup>980</sup> Here it functions as the guarantor of the central power and administration and as the

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<sup>978</sup> 'Both Childs and Gottwald must be taken seriously. The point is not to choose one to the disregard of the other, although holding them together is not easy. With Gottwald, it is important to see that the text has reached its present form and shape by being *in the fray*. These theological claims did not come out of the sky, nor did they have any prior claim to authority; but with Childs, it can be argued that the text as we have it *is above the fray*, the fray of historical interaction and historical-critical analysis. Whereas Gottwald is sociologically relentless, Childs is theologically reassuring. That tension is part of the richness of this faith claim and is also a part of its problematic that we must study. We know the Bible is fully engaged in the struggle for faithfulness, and yet at the same time we also claim that it is out of reach of that struggle. I suspect anyone who chooses either Gottwald or Childs alone too easily escapes the issues that must be faced.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.3.

<sup>979</sup> 'We need to consider not only mutations in the social processes, or mutations in the articulations of God that serve the social processes, but mutations that are said to be going on in the very person of God.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.9. 'As there is conflict among social systems, so there is also conflict between the gods, between those who legitimate the structures of repression and denial and the One who forms new history around the reality of pain.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.20. 'Although this theology always speaks about God's rule as settled and "above the fray," this theology is always worked out and concerned with being "in the fray"; that is, this contractual theology is never disinterested, detached, objectively clear, or perfectly obvious. It is wrought by power agents who have a sociopolitical point to score and who mean to defeat alternative views and legitimate their own.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.23. 'Israel's faith arises in an experience of disorder that works against all human existence. That disorder may be understood *cosmically*, as in Israel's protest against chaos and its affirmations of creation. That disorder may be understood *naturally*, as in the case of barren mothers whose wombs are unopened except by the power of promise. Most characteristically, however, the experience of disorder that preoccupied Israel is historical disorder arising out of unjust, exploitative, oppressive arrangements of social power and social goods. That experience is definitional for all of Israel's ethical reflections.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.46.

<sup>980</sup> This, as I see it, is a move on a par with superstition. As mythological language *may* descend into superstition so the use of an idol to represent a deity *may* become iconic and descend into idolatry. How much this was the case in Egypt and Babylon is a matter of opinion. Personally, I believe that sophisticated Mesopotamians and Egyptians were probably less superstitious and idolatrous than we moderns believe. The fact that the Bible paints them thus should not necessarily be taken at face value.

legitimation of the empire's structures and monopolies.<sup>981</sup> In aniconic religion, on the other hand, the prohibition against the establishment of the deity in an object or place (or even within a name) constitutes the recognition of the deity's freedom and sovereignty, which somehow implies both a rejection of the deity's dependence on the trappings of success and an acceptance of its solidarity with those whom the empires naturally exclude.<sup>982</sup>

On the one hand Brueggemann identifies the paradigm for this aniconic religion 'in the structure of the Decalogue that begins in Yahweh's exclusive aniconic claim and ends in a prohibition of coveting.' On the other hand he finds evidence for the iconic religion 'in royal-temple practices that deny Yahweh freedom and reduce the deity to a status of reliable, predictable patron. The derivative social system for which Yahweh is patron and legitimator is embodied in the monarchy that characteristically gathers silver and gold, that is, engages in economic monopoly.'<sup>983</sup> Brueggemann postulates that this aniconic religion, in alliance with egalitarian social practice, is really just a further expression of what he has termed *embrace of pain* and, conversely, that the iconic tendency in alliance with monopolistic social practice is just an expression of what he has called *structure legitimation*.<sup>984</sup>

#### *Brueggemann's general bi-polar thesis*

So for Brueggemann the Old Testament faith consists of the following two poles held permanently in tension:

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<sup>981</sup> '... *images in religion* accompany inequalities of social power in society, which inevitably result in disproportions of social goods and social access. The location of God in a place or object proposes that the power of life can be identified and located and, therefore, controlled and administered. Thus, the imaged gods of Egypt and Babylon are experienced by Israel as the proponents and legitimations of social systems that enslave and oppress. Images in heaven warrant monopolies on earth. [p.124]. See also p. 133 '...the iconic tendency is reflective of and in the service of social policy. If the iconic tendency is ... reflective of and tied to economic affluence ... it will not surprise that the iconic tendency is reflective of social policies in the service of social monopoly that benefits the affluent. I propose a connection between iconic inclinations in religion and social policies of stratification that support inequality and that advance social monopoly and social marginality.'

<sup>982</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 122. 'Yahweh's aniconic identity distances Israel's God from the conventional ways in which gods are imagined by the practitioners of and pretenders to imperial power. Yahweh's imageless character means that Yahweh is disengaged from the ways of worldly power. ... The stunning outcome of Yahweh's aniconic character leads to a surprising "therefore..." The "therefore" is remarkable, unexpected, inscrutable. We do not know how it follows, but it does follow in Israel's portrayal of this God. That Yahweh is unencumbered permits/causes Yahweh to be allied with and engaged for the marginal ones who go by the name of Yahweh. Yahweh's foundational characteristic is that having an imageless identity makes Yahweh available for and attentive to those who do not participate in the image-making, image-enhancing, image-producing, and image-consuming ways of imperial life.' See also p. 127. 'The imageless God Yahweh, however, has no interest in or need for monopoly. Yahweh does not covet, does not crave territory or goods, Indeed, Yahweh has no need for any land or produce that others may generate. Yahweh's decisive action of letting the people go was a decisive act against the coveting gods and against policies of social monopoly.'

<sup>983</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.137.

<sup>984</sup> 'I propose an arrangement for presenting the main tendencies of the Old Testament faith:

- aniconic religion/egalitarian social practice (the combination of which I have called "pain-embracing").
- iconic religion/monopolistic social practice (the combination of which I have called "structure legitimation").' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.137.

### **1. Structure legitimation**

- as partaking of the common theology (e.g. The Mosaic Law)
- as iconic religion/monopolistic social practice (e.g. The Israelite Monarchy)

### **2. Pain embracing**

- as the struggle to be free of the common theology (e.g. The cry of those marginalized by the Mosaic Law)
- as aniconic religion/egalitarian social practice (e.g. The cry of the prophets against the Israelite Monarchy)

#### *Criticism of Brueggemann's bipolar model*

In coming to terms with this two-poles-in-tension model the first thing we have to determine is whether it constitutes an unavoidable standoff or, alternatively, an unwarranted compromise? To make up our minds on this matter we first shall have to consider the differences between ideological and non-ideological controversies.

Discussion about the Law as ideological

and discussions about the monarchy as strategic

Whatever opinion one has of the Mosaic Law it is quite clear that as a product of a god (it is claimed as being Yahweh's law, not Moses') it was seen as being a structure bearing a definite ideological imprint. This being the case, it is most unlikely that any deficiencies later identified within it by the faithful community would have been ideological in nature. It is clear for instance that it did indeed become necessary to make adjustments by admitting that Yahweh was ready at times to forgive even Category One sins<sup>985</sup> but, whatever adjustments the faithful community made, there was never any question of going back on the basic god-of-the-marginals ideological principle of radical solidarity. Of course revisionism did in fact take place but this was never avowed and came about surreptitiously. On the other hand, whatever opinion one has of the Israelite monarchy it has never been seriously suggested, so far as I am aware, that it was a structure introduced for ideological purposes – though, of course, any number of ideological concepts swiftly became attached to it once it had been introduced. The biblical text itself seems to suggest that kingship was established entirely for strategic reasons - to develop the full potential of the community's military forces against the Philistine menace. The fact that the Israelite monarchy was introduced for strategic reasons means that it was taken as being, in itself, ideologically neutral. This meant that as soon as criticism began to be raised against the new monarchy, which, according to the text, happened very quickly, it inevitably took the form of doubts not about the ideological intentions of the one who had introduced the new structure (Yahweh) but rather about the ideological intentions of those who operated it. In short, it is evident that there existed a huge difference between the controversies concerning the *Mosaic law*<sup>986</sup> and those concerning the *Israelite*

<sup>985</sup> It had always been understood that Yahweh was ready to forgive Category Two sins.

<sup>986</sup> e.g. disputes about Sabbath observance, tithing and ritual matters etc.

*monarchy*; whereas the former naturally tended to be *non-ideological* (because the structure itself was understood by everyone to be intrinsically ideological) those concerning the latter tended to be *intrinsically ideological* (because the structure itself had only been introduced on the strict understanding that it was not ideological.).<sup>987</sup>

Our trouble is that, though in setting up his bi-polar model Brueggemann deals extensively with questions concerning the Mosaic Law and the monarchy, it is difficult to know to what extent he recognises this crucial difference between ideological and non-ideological matters since he fails to provide himself with a political vocabulary capable of marking the distinction. What are the natures of these entities he calls *structure legitimation* and *embrace of pain*? Are they ideological, strategic, tactical or structural? Sometimes he associates them with words such as *religion* and *theology*, which might seem to indicate that he sees them as ideological. At other times he speaks about them as *conserving and transforming tendencies*<sup>988</sup> which, on the contrary, might seem to suggest that he is thinking about them in strategic or structural terms. Whatever the case may be, the fact that in his model he beds-together what appear to be ideological controversies concerning the monarchy with non-ideological controversies surrounding the Law, by describing them both under the rubric of 'poles held in tension', *might* suggest that he is unaware *that while biblical writers judge structural compromise, when properly handled, as being perfectly legitimate they consider ideological compromise as inadmissible.*

Let me illustrate this point from the New Testament. Mark 3;22-26 tells of an incident in which the Jerusalem scribes accuse Jesus of using the power of Satan to rid people of their evil spirits. Jesus replies that the accusation is disingenuous since everyone knows that Satan would never go to war against himself. In this way he highlights the fact, of which everyone is already basically well aware, that while human powers can be expected to compromise with one another the only *possible* relationship between opposing ideologies, between Yahweh and Baal or God and Satan, is conflict and struggle.

#### Dealing with non-ideological controversies

The use of the sex-marker within the first cycle of stories in Genesis - from the garden of Eden to the tower of Babel - clearly shows that the Yahwist is anxious to avoid confusing ideological with non-ideological matters. In his story of Cain - which carries no sex-marker - he announces his general assessment of non-ideological controversies: that they should be managed using the rubric that *the marginal always lies under Yahweh's protection*. This appears to be the scenario Brueggemann analyses in his first volley and he comes to the conclusion that since Yahweh is the one who hears the cry of the rejected marginal the inherent inadequacies of the Law as a legitimised structure have to be addressed even if it means an accommodation involving a change in Yahweh's nature. In other words as a trouble-free, transcendent god who hears this cry of distress Yahweh is obliged to forego the privilege of a distant holiness and become immanent and accept to suffer himself. Clearly Brueggemann is working on the

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<sup>987</sup> 1 Sam 13.

<sup>988</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.138.

premise that Yahweh begins by being a transcendent god. I, however, can find no evidence for this in the texts. Indeed it seems to me that the Yahwist consistently portrays Yahweh as both immanent and metacosmic. This means that he had no need to suffer a change as Brueggemann suggests – a sentimental idea that the Yahwist would have found inconceivable, and rightly so.<sup>989</sup> Yahweh was from the very beginning god-of-the-marginals and as such one who *characteristically* (not, as with Brueggemann by sheer happenstance) heard the cry of those who suffer.

There are other differences in the approaches adopted by Brueggemann and the Yahwist when dealing with non-ideological controversies. The Yahwist uses as his paradigm of ‘non-ideological controversy’ a story in which the marginal (Cain) is the one in error; the one who is cried against (by the blood of Abel). Brueggemann acknowledges this situation but takes as his paradigm the opposite predicament, in which the marginal himself is the one who cries out against his fate (as a result of finding himself branded as a sinner at odds with the Law). In the case of Job, as Brueggemann points out, the basic problem is not, as with Cain, some evil Job has done but rather the ancient world’s primitive and faulty belief, enshrined in the common theology, that misfortune and good fortune are the result of sin and righteousness respectively.<sup>990</sup> Since the writer of the poem also laboured under this misapprehension he was not in a position to resolve the problem. However, in accordance with the Yahwist’s god-of-the-marginals precept he concluded that Job’s comforters were wrong to try and rid themselves of the embarrassing problem of the suffering righteous person by effectively marginalizing Job. Consequently he announces, in the teeth of received opinion, that Yahweh vindicates Job’s contention that he has done nothing to merit the evil which has befallen him. In this way he effectively undermines the common theology as the basic thought process used in the ancient world for dealing with ethical matters.<sup>991</sup>

#### Dealing with ideological controversies

Employing his sex-marker technique the Yahwist develops his paradigm for ideological controversies in the story of the sons of god and the daughters of men, followed by that of the flood. He announces here the principle that since Yahweh manifestly does not eradicate those who commit Category One ideological sin, the marginal community is obliged to find ways of surviving in a world effectively (if not finally) ruled by centrarchal powers. For his part, in his ‘second volley’, Brueggemann chooses as his paradigm for (what appears to me at least as) ideological controversies those iconic stories in the Old Testament in which surplus wealth is centralised in order to establish a shrine where the presence of the deity can be guaranteed. As I see it the only significant difference between these two paradigms is that, whereas in the case of the Yahwist’s story the concern is with the problem of how Israel was to deal with Category One sin *in the surrounding nations*, in Brueggemann’s iconic stories the concern is with the problem of Category One sin *within the Israelite community itself*:

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<sup>989</sup> I say this because for ancient people deities represented ideologies and ideologies, at least in their basic nature, never change.

<sup>990</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 18

<sup>991</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 25

Exodus 32 where Aaron collects Israel's surplus gold to replace the absent Yahweh by a reliable deity - in my terms a Category One sin judged to merit the death penalty.

Judges 8.22 - 27 where Gideon refuses the Israelites' request that he should become their king but collects their gold to make an ephod (sacred object) to be kept in his city - as I see it a Category One sin identified by the sex-marker phrase that 'Israel played the harlot after it' (the ephod).

2 Sam. 7.1-7 where David requests the right to use some of the surplus wealth he has collected from Israel to build a Temple - a request denied as inappropriate.

1 Kings 8 where Solomon uses some of the surplus wealth collected from Israel to actually build the temple despite its inappropriateness (v.27), the result being that those who use it will need forgiveness (v.30).<sup>992</sup>

Brueggemann is, of course, well aware that the principle Old Testament tradition is unequivocally aniconic and critical of all iconic tendencies, even if he sees this tradition as being sustained only by a minority.<sup>993</sup>

Israel's primal commitment out of the exodus-Sinai texts is to a militantly aniconic faith and a vigorously egalitarian society, but the reality of that militant faith and that vigorous social vision was difficult to maintain. It was difficult to maintain not primarily because of external pressures but because of the shape of Israel's own life. As Israel became a community securely established, as slaves became masters, as peasants became managers of surplus property, the yearning for a locatable God was accompanied by a modified social policy and practice that legitimated and authorized social distinctions, political stratification, and differential economic advantage.

I quite accept his point that it was not just external pressures but also internal changes which caused Israel's drift towards 'the iconic tendency'. But the important question is not from whence these iconic *tendencies* (which Brueggemann here so confusingly contrasts with 'aniconic *faith*'<sup>994</sup>) came but what was their nature. If you view the monarchy/temple controversies as essentially ideological, as I do (which is to say, as having to do with arguments about how human power was to be structured within the community) then if you wish to talk about these iconic and aniconic tendencies in terms of a tension between them you are obliged to make it clear that what you have in mind is *an unremitting conflict and struggle where no quarter is given till power-mongers are shamed into abandoning their domineering ways*. This is clearly not what Brueggemann has in mind. For him tension seems to mean a more or less uneasy compromise set to last indefinitely, in which a certain amount of justification, and hence room for manoeuvre, is found on both sides.<sup>995</sup> As I see it therefore,

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<sup>992</sup> In all three texts [Exod. 32, 2 Sam. 7, and 1Kings 8] there is a push towards God's locatable presence. In each case, the claim is reflective of an economic situation of affluence, and in each case the claim is subject to harsh criticism and rejection.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.132.

<sup>993</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.133.

<sup>994</sup> As I see it the word *faith* indicates an ideological matter whereas the word *tendency* indicates a non-ideological matter.

<sup>995</sup> In speaking of the common theology/embrace-of-pain polarity Brueggemann writes: 'Where the countertheme of pain-embracing is present, it does not supersede or nullify structure legitimation but only lives in tension with it. That tension must be kept alive in all faithful biblical theology. I do not believe one can say there is a development from one to the other, but there is an ongoing tension, unresolved and unresolvable.' *Old*, p.42. He speaks of iconic and aniconic religion in terms of poles of transformation and conservation *Old*, p. 144 which also indicates that he envisages no possible resolution of the tension between them.

Brueggemann's analysis is woefully flawed because of his refusal to acknowledge the ideological dimension of this iconic/aniconic debate. In this regard I find the Yahwist's understanding of the problem so much more enlightening. For him, the existence of Category One sin (here in the form of the iconic tendency) and Yahweh's refusal to act decisively to eliminate it has for consequence the unpalatable fact that this evil will always be around polluting the world, right up until the moment when it either destroys civilisation or is shamed out of existence. This means that Israel, as Yahweh's faithful servant, will always find herself in an uncomfortable stand-off situation right up until the moment when she accomplishes her task and is rewarded by the introduction of the kingdom. Only at this point will the civilisation powers, which heretofore have been causing her such grief, be shamed and start consulting her as to how to go about changing their ways. Does this imply that Israel would be justified in the meantime in compromising her stance? Certainly not, if it meant in any way sacrificing her commitment to the task of demonstrating what living in radical solidarity was all about. That is surely obvious.

In claiming that the monarchy/temple controversies were implicitly ideological it should be understood that I am not in any way advocating that the structures of monarchy or temple themselves were inherently sinful.<sup>996</sup> I am simply saying that in the biblical reports these controversies are seen as having important implications for Israel's commitment to the god of the marginals. In other words the introduction of the structures of monarchy and temple were viewed by biblical writers as inherently dangerous steps to take even if they were not actually seen as illicit.

When you come to the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me'; you may indeed set as king over you him whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not multiply horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You shall never return that way again."  
...<sup>997</sup>

Ideological controversies tend to surface at second hand within a community, in the form of arguments about structures, e.g.: Are you for or against privatisation ... for or against public housing? This makes ideological controversies difficult to deal with since such arguments over structures by no means *exactly* represent the ideological differences which underlie them. Thus, for example, one can never take it as read in any given instance that being against the sale of council housing is a foolproof method of verifying a person's left wing credentials or that being for privatisation is a guaranteed way of ascertaining a person's right wing beliefs. That said, it would be stupid to go to the other extreme and pretend that structural questions were irrelevant in determining a person's ideological leanings since perhaps ninety percent of all ideological controversies take the form of structural debate. There are two things we have to bear in mind therefore. In the first place certain structures tend to become ideological battle-grounds because they favour either a centralizing or a more even distribution of power. In the second place a structure judged to be dangerous for

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<sup>996</sup> 'It is too much to claim that the temple is iconic. If, however, we understand iconic as the concern to locate God's faithfulness and God's presence, then the temple intends and does indeed serve such a function.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.131.

<sup>997</sup> Deut 17.14 -16.



ideological reasons may, nevertheless, appear attractive because it has secondary characteristics that are deemed to be highly desirable in the given circumstances.

Turning back now to Israel's situation, if we follow the Mendenhall/Gottwald model, as Brueggemann clearly does, we have to see the community in the first instance as finding herself wonderfully free to structure herself without regard to the surrounding political situation. In choosing to re-tribalise, thereby inventing for herself a totally new structure of organization patterned simply according to her ideological perceptions, Israel was clearly making a declaration that she considered the kingship structure which, presumably, most of her population had heretofore been used to, as ideologically suspect, meaning by this word dangerous not illicit. Later, of course, with the arrival of the Philistines she found to her cost that she could not go on ignoring the outside world. The lesson the Philistines taught her was that a small, well-armed and highly organised power could overrun a much bigger though loosely structured community. If Israel decided in these circumstances to choose for herself a king it could only have been because she was desperate to find a more militarily efficient organization and was confident that she could deal with the ideological dangers which the kingship represented. It may well have been the case, as Brueggemann suggests, that she had already been thinking in this direction. However, it is clear that the biblical story itself represents the structural change as having been made in such a way as to minimise the ideological dangers. Saul, as king, becomes military commander-in-chief but he continues to have no court or standing army. When this structure fails, David, on being made king, is allowed both a court and a standing army but is not allowed to make a census or to establish a central shrine.

My conclusion is that the general perspective of the Old Testament is that whereas an ideological compromise is always viewed as being the worst kind of betrayal a structural compromise is considered perfectly proper so long as the risks involved are properly managed. If I am right this means that Brueggemann's model (common theology held in tension with embrace of pain and aniconic religion held in tension with iconic religion) will simply not do *if a compromise on both a structural and an ideological level is implied*. But is it? Did Israel's employment of the common theology and her involvement with iconic religion of itself necessarily involve ideological betrayal?

The common theology as justifiable linguistics

As Morton Smith describes the common theology it clearly implies centrarchal values established by transcendent gods. This indicates that he sees it as ideological: a politically coloured entity. This is entirely unsurprising seeing that the common theology constitutes a pattern he has distilled from extant ancient Near Eastern civilisation texts. However, there is no more reason to suppose the common theology was a *civilisation* construct than that the mythological superstructure was a civilisation construct. Indeed it is far more likely that like the mythological superstructure the common theology was an ideologically neutral linguistic device long predating civilisation and that as such it was perfectly capable of accommodating ideological concepts of any political hue. That just as pre-civilisation men and women most probably used the mythological superstructure in order to communicate about the

various powers they experienced in the universe so too they also probably used the common theology in order to communicate about the ethical grain<sup>998</sup> they were convinced they experienced within it. Of course Israel's civilisation-neighbours employed the common theology in connection with their cosmological, 'survival of the fittest', success- and power-oriented deities. This meant that in their usage the common theology was given a strong centrarchal colouring. Israel, on the other hand, used this same linguistic device to establish a grain appropriate to the character of their metacosmic god of the marginals. Consequently, in their texts we find this same common theology taking on a very different political perspective.<sup>999</sup>

Brueggemann congratulates Gottwald for identifying this state of affairs.<sup>1000</sup> However, he rightly points to a fundamental problem in store for *any* who would use this common theology, regardless of the political colouring they bestow upon it, which is that in setting up criteria to determine right from wrong they are intrinsically responsible for the marginalization of those who, falling foul of it, are then pronounced as sinners.<sup>1001</sup> This problem becomes especially crucial when, as Brueggemann suggests invariably happens, those who use the common theology to establish their own perception of a grain within the universe then proceed to create and legitimise a social structure which enables them to police human behaviour and force people to align their conduct with the identified grain.<sup>1002</sup> Unfortunately Israel proved no exception to this general rule.<sup>1003</sup> When she took the important step of replacing the centrarchal cosmic deities in the common theology with her metacosmic god of the marginals she found herself inadvertently stepping out of the frying pan into the fire. Using her reformulation of the common theology to break with the pattern of oppression established by the Egyptian pharaohs and the Canaanite kings she inadvertently found herself thereby marginalizing

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<sup>998</sup> Though Brueggemann does not use the grain-of-the-universe expression he describes the phenomenon itself very succinctly: '... the world as governed by God has a structure to it. That structure is known and firm, legitimate and reliable, and it can be transgressed only at a cost. ... Thus, obedience is not just a social requirement, but it corresponds to the requirements of the very structure of created reality.'

Brueggemann, *Old*, p.15.

<sup>999</sup> 'The most important aspect of the pentateuchal tradition for our subject is the law. Law in the Pentateuch is not positive law. It is deeply rooted in and informed by the narrative memory and commitments of Israel; that is, the law in Israel is an attempt to give sustained, institutionalised form to the countervision of the Moses narrative. We completely misunderstand if we imagine that the laws of the Pentateuch are simply rules for order. They are, rather, acts of passionate protest and vision whereby Israel explores in detail how the gifts and visions of the exodus rescue can be practised in Israel on an ongoing basis as the foundation of society. As God acted in response to a cry of hurt, the law is an attempt to devise institutional power arrangements in which those in authority, those who have legitimate power, those who "know good and evil," are responsive to hurt and attentive to the dangers of exploitation.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.78.

<sup>1000</sup> 'Gottwald has applied a sociological critique to this common theology. He shows how it has been radically transformed by the historical experience of Israel. He builds on his hypothesis of early Israel as a liberated community of egalitarianism, a hypothesis I accept.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 20.

<sup>1001</sup> 'I am not interested in the speculative question of whether people can live fully obedient lives. That we do not fully obey is, in any case, beyond dispute and poses an enormous question for theology of a contractual kind.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.18.

<sup>1002</sup> 'Every theological claim about moral rationality is readily linked to a political claim of sovereignty and a political practice of totalitarianism. Such linkage need not be so. There is no necessity to it, but it regularly is so.' Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 16.

<sup>1003</sup> '...even with Moses, the leadership of God and the leadership of Moses are easily merged, and protests against Moses' authority result in curse (Numbers 12).' Brueggemann, *Old*, p.17.

some of her own people. In doing so she made them out to be enemies of Yahweh, a vastly more formidable opponent. This, of course, was a classical error since Yahweh can *never* be the enemy of marginals given the fact that he is by definition their god. It is this almost inescapable contradiction which, Brueggemann claims, ‘gives some ground for those who regard the Old Testament as indeed a book of justice, law, and retribution’<sup>1004</sup> - see Davies’ remarks about Israel’s unethical religion above.<sup>1005</sup>

This is the problem which Brueggemann claims the Old Testament faith specifically sets out to address by means of its second pole: the *embrace of pain*.<sup>1006</sup> Brueggemann rightly points out that the trouble with the common theology is that since it construes pain in terms of punishment it can only allow the experience of pain to be viewed negatively, as a sign of sin and hence as something offensive in itself.<sup>1007</sup> The embrace of pain, as the acceptance of the fact that suffering is not in itself offensive but something intrinsically human which can have positive results, is therefore an implicit criticism of the common theology and a subversion of it.<sup>1008</sup> It might be thought that since we no longer accept that pain and suffering are the consequences of sin we have now outgrown this problem which Brueggemann raises: that just as the development of scientific language has freed us from the superstition trap introduced by the mythological linguistics so it has also freed us from the marginalization trap introduced by the common theology. But is this the case? Well, it might be if indeed it is true that we nowadays are becoming more willing to accept that our universe is intrinsically amoral and that the ethical standards which we impose on ourselves and others are in reality devoid of intrinsic value. However, I have yet to encounter anyone who has clearly made such a move even within the Marxist and scientific fraternities. For all the people I have ever encountered have behaved as if there is such a thing as right and wrong, a fact that I could easily have verified by wantonly smashing up their property and seeing how they reacted! Consequently I feel obliged to find Brueggemann justified in claiming that we human beings continue as ever to work with a tension between ‘ethical norms’ and ‘an obligation to forgive’ however contradictory such a situation may appear to be.

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<sup>1004</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p.8. ‘... if [a basic commitment to *contractual theology*] is foundational to the Mosaic traditions, Deuteronomic theology, the prophets, and the wisdom materials, then we may say that it is the foundational construct for Israel’s faith. .... it affirms that there is a moral rationality and coherence to life. There are orders, limits, and boundaries within which humanness is possible and beyond which there can only be trouble. Such a conclusion affirms that the Old Testament belongs to its cultural world in basic theological ways, and it warns against any inclination to see Israel’s faith too readily as a religion of grace.’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p.15.

<sup>1005</sup> Page 245.

<sup>1006</sup> ‘The reason that contractual theology must be sharply criticized is that it lacks a human face when it is articulated consistently. It is a system of reality that acknowledges no slippage, no graciousness, no room for failure.’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p.17.

<sup>1007</sup> ‘The key element in the critique is *the issue of pain*. The contractual theology of coherence and rationality offers a world in which pain need not occur; and where it does occur, pain is a failure to be corrected.’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p.18.

<sup>1008</sup> ‘A theology of contractual coherence must excommunicate all the pained and pain-bearers as having violated the common theology. Indeed the presence of pain-bearers is a silent refutation of the legitimated structures. Visible pain-bearers, therefore, must be denied legitimacy as well as visibility because they assert that the legitimated structures are not properly functioning.’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p.19.

Iconic religion as unforgivable: an ideological affront to the god of the marginals.

I have already shown that in a good percentage of the texts which Brueggemann uses to exemplify iconic religion in the Bible the writers make it quite clear that they see the phenomenon itself as Category 1 ideological sin<sup>1009</sup> which is to say as behaviour never to be countenanced in any shape or form. How then does Brueggemann seek to convince us that the situation is otherwise: that iconic religion is perpetually held in tension with aniconic religion in the biblical tradition?

The fact of the matter is that Brueggemann does not have to work too hard to achieve his ends since most of his audience are civilisation folk who naturally find it inconceivable that a religious/ideological community like a Church (Brueggemann writes for Christians rather than for humanity at large) could operate otherwise than as an organisation having the objective of furthering its aims by increasing its power and influence in the world. For such people it appears obvious that a Church is destined to organise by providing itself with hierarchical officers to centralise authority, collect finances and construct centres of operation. In other words, in the eyes of civilisation-folk the step from religious/ideological community to organisation goes without saying which means that it is not difficult for Brueggemann to convince his audience that iconic religion is a feature no Christian/biblical community could possibly do without. However, what seems an inevitable step to civilisation-people like ourselves may not appear to be inevitable for those intent on practicing radical solidarity.

As far as arguments are concerned Brueggemann tries to convince us that iconic and aniconic religion naturally operate within a community as ‘transforming’ and ‘conservation’ tendencies.<sup>1010</sup> This is quite an astute move given our modern preoccupation with the notions of progress and development. However, while I can see his argument appealing to present day Christians I have to point out that such notions are conspicuously absent in the biblical material. Of course one is perfectly justified in arguing that just as there are conservative and adventurous people in modern society so there must have been their equivalents in ancient society as well. However, the fact is that nothing leads us to suspect that the biblical writers themselves were concerned with such phenomena or even were aware of them, so the idea that biblical writers arranged their ethical thinking along such lines seems out of the question.

Brueggemann also tries to bolster his twin-pole thesis by arguing that a parallel exists between iconic religion and the common theology. Since it is evident that the common theology is indispensable when dealing with ethical matters such a parallel, if it could be proved, would naturally indicate that iconic religion is likewise indispensable when dealing with organisational matters. But is Brueggemann right in supposing that the common theology and iconic religion can properly be tied together under the rubric of *structural legitimation*? I am certainly persuaded that the employment of iconic religion

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<sup>1009</sup> See p. 289 above.

<sup>1010</sup> ‘If we are to organise Old Testament theology in this way around the poles of transformation and conservation, around legitimation of structure and embrace of pain, around what is distinctive and what is held in common with other religious traditions, around aniconic and iconic discernments of God, we are left with a question: How are we to adjudicate the relative authority of the two trajectories in any particular expository situation?’ Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 144.

leads directly to structural legitimation, thereby countenancing domination, and Brueggemann seems to concur:

I propose a connection between iconic inclinations in religion and social policies of stratification that support inequity and that advance social monopoly and social marginality.<sup>1011</sup>

This convinces me (though apparently not Brueggemann himself) that the biblical writers were right in identifying iconic religion as Category 1 sin: behaviour to be avoided like the plague. However, the question is: is the common theology tarred by the same brush?

Brueggemann writes of the common theology thus:

This theology of moral coherence ... is also *open to exploitation*. ... Every theological claim about moral rationality is readily linked to a political claim of sovereignty and a political practice of totalitarianism. Such a linkage need not be so. There is no necessity to it, but it regularly is so. Creation theology readily becomes imperial propaganda and ideology.<sup>1012</sup>

I can readily agree with Brueggemann that humans *tend* to exploit the common theology when making their political claims to sovereignty but this is not the argument. You can only claim, as Brueggemann does, that the common theology operates under the rubric of structural legitimation if you can establish a direct relationship between the two but Brueggemann here bravely admits that no such direct relationship exists! It is undeniable that humans are characteristically prepared to use anything which comes to hand to try and justify their right to dominate others but this does not mean that everything on which their eye alights must therefore be understood as ideologically flawed. The truth of the matter is that whereas iconic religion is indelibly coloured by an ideology of dominion the common theology manifestly isn't. In other words there is no parallel between the two for whereas iconic religion *necessarily* indicates the presence of structural legitimation and a revisionist ideology of dominance, the use of the common theology does no such thing. For though the common theology is certainly sometimes exploited in the furtherance of the idea of structural legitimation it can also just as easily be employed in the service of the idea of solidarity (mercy, justice, loving kindness and forgiveness) as it is in the Bible's revolutionary, god-of-the-marginals' texts.

### *Conclusion*

I find that though Brueggemann is perfectly justified in looking for a unifying principle in Old Testament theology he is clearly wrong in pretending to discover such a unity in a bi-polarity held perpetually in tension. Our study has shown that in fact the Old Testament tradition resulted rather from a complex process of revolution and revisionism which means that in the Bible we are presented effectively with two *warring* principles even though for obvious reasons this situation is never avowed by its revisionist editors. One of these is the 'god-given authority' or *imago dei* principle of dominion. This scholars nowadays identify as the perspective of the post-exilic priestly authorities who, it is generally agreed, imposed their editorial slant on the final document. In the Bible as we now have it, therefore, this revisionist notion is found

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<sup>1011</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 133.

<sup>1012</sup> Brueggemann, *Old*, p. 16.

parasitically overlying an older ‘revolutionary’ god-of-the-marginals idea which we have previously labelled radical solidarity. Clearly the intention of the post-exilic priestly administrators, in superimposing on the community’s original ‘revolutionary’ tradition their own revisionist slant, was to get rid of the obnoxious political idea of radical solidarity while taking sustenance from the powerful religious notion of the metacosmic god which the idea of radical solidarity had of necessity generated for itself. They managed to do this surreptitiously and without drawing attention to what they were doing mainly by creating a religious smokescreen behind which to work but they also did it, apparently, by exploiting the inherent contradiction present in the ‘common theology/necessary forgiveness’ dualism which made it easy for them to rationalise the situation by eliminating one of the contradictory features i.e.: the unacceptable obligation to forgive.

As a result of this underhand procedure the Old Testament ethic, as we now have it, constitutes the way in which these two warring principles (radical solidarity and justified domination) both coloured Israel’s ideas and set their confused marks on the behavioural patterns of the developing community. This means that there is now no way of making a unified sense of the received text (itself undoubtedly the work of the priestly administrator or of one of his friends) without viewing it in this revolution/revisionist light. However, it seems to me that what we can say with absolute certitude is that the original unifying principle in the community’s tradition was the god-of-the-marginals *radical solidarity* idea. According to this ‘revolutionary’ faith, Israel’s problems on the non-ideological level were to be dealt with on the basis that marginals of whatever description lie under the protection of Yahweh. As such they must not be molested but rather should be given every possible encouragement to reintegrate within the community. As concerns problems on the ideological level, these were to be dealt with by applying the rule that while structural compromises are in order – given a clear evaluation of the risks – ideological compromises are never, under any circumstances, acceptable.

It must here, once again, be reiterated that this ‘revolutionary’ ethic does not view human intercourse primarily from a *cosmic* point of view, whereby appeal is made to the natural, survival-of-the-fittest law in order to establish norms for human behaviour. On the contrary, it judges human behaviour from the point of view of those who have been excluded from society *by* the natural cosmic processes; that is to say, from the point of view of a people who seek to establish norms of behaviour which rectify their intolerable and unjustifiable situation even though to do so inevitably relativises the normal, civilisation-view of things.<sup>1013</sup> So, properly understood, the ethic of the Jewish Bible has to be seen as challenging the common, cosmic ethic of ancient near-eastern civilisations. It should be understood as part and parcel of a crazy bet made by this community of social failures against civilisation’s natural world of success. This being the case the biblical ethic should not be seen, as Davies seems to see it, simply as a value system imposed on the community by rulers who misused the notion of the metacosmic god to justify their authority – even though such an illicit imposition

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<sup>1013</sup> See for example the way in which the evangelist John speaks of the world as something relativised by Jesus and his spirit. e.g. Jn 1.10; 7.7; 14.17; 14.27; 15.18 etc.

undoubtedly took place – for this was simply a later revisionist aberration.<sup>1014</sup> Rather, the biblical ethic should be seen as something which this extraordinary, ‘revolutionary’ body of marginals took upon itself, both in hope and in trembling, every father’s daughter and every mother’s son.

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<sup>1014</sup> Davies, of course, does not distinguish between metacosmological and cosmological positions. He takes it as self evident that Israel adopted an authoritarian and ideological (his ‘religious’) approach to ethics and leaves us to infer that a similar, though perhaps slightly less authoritarian, ideological position was adopted by all the other surrounding societies. In other words he operates under the assumption that metacosmic transcendence and cosmic transcendence function in the self-same authoritarian/ideological manner. This seems to me intrinsically unlikely, given that Israel developed her metacosmological ideas *in opposition to* the cosmological gods. The hot, strident tones which, as we have seen above, characterize Israelite law codes, I take as indicating a metacosmic, revolutionary stance while Davies seems to take them as indicating an inadmissible authoritarian and ideological approach to ethics. However, if Davies is right how does he explain the noticeably much cooler, laid-back approach to ethics characteristic of the other ancient near eastern law codes? Since there is very little doubt that the societies surrounding Israel were indeed ideologically authoritarian you might think it would have been better had Davies reflected a bit before assuming that the apodictic tones - uniquely specific to Israel’s law codes - also indicate an ideologically authoritarian approach; logic would tend to indicate the contrary. Having said that I would not for a moment deny what is indeed obvious, that Israel’s ethic *looks* very authoritarian to outsiders like ourselves, but, then, revolutionary ethics *always appear* authoritarian to outsiders even while being perceived as *liberating* within the revolutionary body that engenders them.





## Chapter 14

### The Justification of Ideas

Before engaging with the last Mosaic idea on A. B. Davidson's list (the strategic idea of redemption) we need to deal with a couple of questions thrown up in the last few chapters. We have described the Yahwist's development of the metacosmic god-of-the-marginals idea as 'revolutionary' and labelled as *revisionist* the post-exilic, priestly authorities' abandonment of the god-of-the-marginals and exploitation of the metacosmic-god to justify their alternative concept of god-given authority. The question is, can any value judgement be made about these positions? Can we say, for example, that the Yahwist's position is superior to that of the priestly writer? Or are we forced to conclude that, by modern standards, both disqualify themselves by indulging in religious speculation? In this chapter we will consider both of these questions.

#### *The Justification of Religious Ideas*

One cannot live in a post-enlightenment society and not be aware of the serious criticisms that have been levelled against religious notions as such. These criticisms are a factor in all ideological debate, making it necessary for everyone to address them in one way or another. However, whilst we are all aware of the general terms of the religion-versus-atheism argument it is easy to become confused when dealing with specific ideas. So it will be as well if we approach the question with some caution.

#### *Religion and superstition*

In 1961 Nikita Khrushchev famously declared that he had sent Uri Gagarin to circle the globe in a sputnik to verify whether God exists and that the Soviet cosmonaut had found no one. He was, of course, mocking his adversaries: trumpeting the success of the Russian space programme and using the occasion to poke fun at the Americans, slyly insinuating that their space technology was as obsolete as their Christian ideology. What I find interesting about this declaration is that, whatever the Americans made of it in the nineteen sixties, I am certain that the Sumerians in the first half of the second millennium BCE would have found it spurious. In their view the gods inhabited the earth and nether regions just as much as the sky. Consequently, they would no more have supposed that An, their sky-living god, would have been visible to a Soviet cosmonaut than Enki or Enlil, his earth-living co-divinities, would have been visible to ordinary Russians living on the ground. The point I am making is that the modern rationalistic mind tends to equate religion simplistically with superstition. The fact is that not even the Sumerian religion of the second millennium BCE can be adequately understood in such terms, let alone Judaism or Christianity.

In our long struggle to come to terms with our environment we humans have developed a number of tools to assist us, the most important of which is language itself. Today we tend to see language as an analytical tool that enables us to achieve a verifiable

understanding of what is going on around us. However, for the ancients, language was descriptive, not analytical. They used it simply as a way of communicating and sharing awareness of how things were, the object being to find ways of living with phenomena and exploiting them to their advantage. Thus, for example, they conversed with each other about how animals behaved so as to be able to avoid them if they were dangerous, or to catch them if they were suitable to eat. The first step was to give the animals names and then to tell stories about them in which their salient characteristics were highlighted. Naturally, this same process was adopted when it came to describing the way in which such important phenomena as the sky, the rivers and the seasons operated. In this way all the powers which the ancients experienced, both seen and unseen, received names and *such a process inevitably meant unconsciously imbuing them with spurious personalities.*

This, as we now see from our vantage-point in history, was a dangerous step to take. It was obviously advantageous to set a community on its guard against local environmental dangers and it was obviously effective to do this by graphically describing the characteristics of the dangers in question. Thus a nearby river, for example, would be portrayed as a capricious female spirit who by her apparently warm and pleasant aspect enticed people in to play, only treacherously to suffocate them in a deep, icy embrace. However, it cannot be denied that in thus pretending that a river had personality the communication involved a basic deceit which, while appearing innocuous, inevitably engendered a superstitious approach to life that brought great harm on the community. In other words, the invention of mythical language turned out to be a two-edged weapon, bringing harm as well as benefit. It was therefore a great liberation when, at the time of the enlightenment, an analytical language was finally developed and made available for general use. For this rendered it possible for humans at last to communicate about their environment without at the same time opening the door to superstition.

However, while it is obviously right to welcome and embrace this advance it is quite wrong to pretend, as some do, that the ancients' mythical language was *simply* an indulgence in superstition. This, of course, is why I have described mythology as being, at least in the first instance, *a linguistic device* in which the indubitable powers controlling the universe, whose effects were experienced but whose nature was not always properly understood (i.e. their 'presence' was unseen) were, for ease of handling, *represented* as personalities – gods and goddesses and the like. Just how much the author of a given myth fell into the trap of superstition is impossible to tell. We may suspect that a certain amount of it was almost always present but in the case of the Sumerian mythmakers I would suggest that superstition was seldom a dominant factor and that had Nikita Khrushchev made the effort to master their mode of expression he would have understood them pretty well. Given this general appreciation it would seem wise, if people wish to continue to employ mythological expression, that they should combine it with careful, analytical explanations. This, so it seems to me, is what most of us do. We do not wish to avoid mythological ('poetical') expression altogether since we recognise it as a powerful way of sharing our experience of common situations but we want it to be clear when we use it that we are talking metaphorically and not literally.

*Is the metacosmic-god idea a bit of superstition?*

There is, however, a problem with this whole scenario: it takes no account of the biblical witness. Of course most people see no point in giving special consideration to the Bible since it is clear to them that as a book of its time it too is couched in mythological language. This being the case they simply *assume* that the biblical writers must also habitually have fallen into the superstition trap. However, as we shall now see, they are quite mistaken for the fact is that though the Bible certainly adopts a non-analytic stance it is just as critical of superstition as is the modern scientific spirit.

Until now we have used the word superstition to mean, quite specifically, the pretence that certain impersonal objects and forces have personality – but clearly this is only the way in which the disease begins. The trouble with this illicit approach is that it tends to create in the mind a host of irrational beliefs and fears that inhibit our healthy dialectical involvement with our surroundings. Thus, instead of dealing rationally with our environment we start to look for ways of appealing to these inanimate objects and forces by performing flattering ceremonies in ‘their’ honour and offering ‘them’ gifts in the hope that in doing so we may somehow appease ‘them’ and bring ‘them’ on side. We call such manipulations magic. Theologians attempt to differentiate between miracle and magic but, as John Dominic Crossan points out,<sup>1015</sup> this is a futile exercise since what people tend to mean by miracles is just authorised magic – and what they mean by magic is simply unauthorised miracles. So we shall have *to begin* at least by assuming that all religion is tinged with superstition until it is proved otherwise.

As regards the Biblical attitude to superstition, the word itself appears only once in the Revised Standard Version, in Acts 25.19 where it translates δεισιδαιμονία: literally ‘fear of the gods’.<sup>1016</sup> When employed positively, δεισιδαιμονία basically means ‘religion’, or ‘bad religion’ i.e. ‘superstition’ when used pejoratively as here. It is immediately clear, therefore, that we are not going to find the Bible specifically pronouncing on superstition as we have defined it since whatever the word δεισιδαιμονία means, it clearly doesn’t involve an *analytical* approach. How then can I justify the assertion that the Bible is critical of what we call superstition? There is some indication that biblical writers made a distinction between the official Israelite religion and popular magic, after the manner noticed by Crossan. They usually described the practitioners of magic as either wizards, mediums or sorcerers, and the writer of the book of Samuel described Saul as consulting such a person when he was in dire straits because Yahweh had turned against him.<sup>1017</sup> Isaiah also witheringly

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<sup>1015</sup> ‘Magic and religion can be mutually distinguished, in the ancient world or in the modern one, by political and prescriptive definitions but not by substantive, descriptive, or neutral descriptions. ... It is endlessly fascinating to watch Christian theologians describe Jesus as miracle worker rather than magician and then attempt to define the substantive difference between these two. There is, it would seem, from the tendentiousness of such arguments, an ideological need to protect religion and its miracles from magic and its effects.’ Crossan, *Historical* p. 305.

<sup>1016</sup> The Greek word also appears in an adjectival form in Acts 17.22.

<sup>1017</sup> Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the wizards out of the land. The Philistines assembled, and came and encamped at Shunem; and Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by the prophets. The Saul said to his

described his fellow Israelites as resorting to ‘mediums and wizards who chirp and mutter’ because Yahweh had hidden his face.<sup>1018</sup> However it is interesting to note that when it comes to dealing with foreign situations biblical writers make no such distinction but lump official and unofficial religious practices together, as here in this oracle against Egypt:

And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,  
and they will fight every man against his brother  
and every man against his neighbour,  
city against city and kingdom against kingdom.  
and the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out,  
and I will confound their plans;  
and they will consult the idols and the sorcerers,  
and the mediums and the wizards;  
and I will give over the Egyptians into the hands of a hard master;  
and a fierce king will rule over them, says the Lord of hosts.<sup>1019</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the distinction biblical writers were intent on making was not the one made by Crossan between religion and magic but rather that between metacosmic Yahwism on the one hand and cosmological religious practices of any description on the other. This is why we find them castigating the practice of popular magic within Israel by employing the selfsame sex-marker as they use in decrying the worship of foreign, cosmological gods.<sup>1020</sup>

If a person turns to mediums and wizards, *playing the harlot after them*, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from amongst his people.<sup>1021</sup>

Since biblical writers were manifestly opposed to every sort of cosmological ‘religious’ practice it goes without saying that they must have been radically opposed to superstition as we have so far defined it.<sup>1022</sup> Of course it has to be emphasised once again that it was their interest in the metacosmic god-of-the-marginals, not scientific analysis, that brought them to adopt this anti-superstition position. That said, their exposures amounted to pretty much the same thing: that the personalising of cosmological objects/forces (in their terms ‘the worship of idols’) was simply ridiculous.<sup>1023</sup> The fact that Christianity (and to a lesser extent Judaism) has often countenanced superstition is not in itself proof to the contrary. After all, Isaac Newton too was clearly, at times, superstitious yet this is not seen as reflecting adversely on the scientific spirit of the enlightenment.<sup>1024</sup>

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servants, “seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and enquire of her.” 1 Sam 28.3-7.

<sup>1018</sup> And when they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony! Surely for this word which they speak there is no dawn. ... Is 8.19-20

<sup>1019</sup> Is 19.2-4

<sup>1020</sup> Of course when the prophets accuse the authorities of Baal worship and of going after foreign gods this should not necessarily be taken literally. It may only mean that cosmological religious practices were being introduced into state Yahwism.

<sup>1021</sup> Lev 20.6

<sup>1022</sup> i.e. as the illicit attribution of personality to cosmological objects/forces.

<sup>1023</sup> There was an important difference, of course. Scientists today seek to use *analysis* to demonstrate that superstition is incapable of bring about *true understanding*. The Hebrews, way back in the past, sought to use *ideology* to demonstrate that idolatry was incapable of bringing about *true creativity*.

<sup>1024</sup> See for example his papers on the occult.

*Is the metacosmic-god idea an unjustifiable speculation?*

Even if we clear the biblical writers of the charge of peddling superstition there are other accusations which have been levelled against them. For example it is claimed that the idea of a metacosmic creator is in itself fraudulent in that it is based on pure make-believe: on an imaginary personal power for which there is no earthly evidence. In modern times this accusation has often been formulated in terms of the so-called 'god of the gaps'; the argument being that ancient people invented the idea of deity to fill the gaps in their knowledge about the universe but that, since we now have no need of such a prop, maintaining it is foolish.

Some scientists seem to believe that we are now in a position to verify not just the way in which the universe has developed but also the process of creation itself, thereby eliminating any need that there might have been in the past for a hypothetical creator. If this were the case we would indeed have to abandon the metacosmic-god idea.

However, it isn't. As my own teacher, Tom Torrance, taught us many years ago creation, which is the act of bringing something into being, can only be verified by working your way into a position from which you can witness the act itself. Thus, for example, in the case of an artist's creation of a portrait one can so place oneself as to be able to see all the materials and thus witness how these are manipulated to bring the portrait itself into existence. However, as far as the space-time continuum is concerned its creation cannot possibly be verified by working your way *back in time*, closer and closer to the beginnings of the universe, since time itself is part of that which is being created. Nor, alternatively, can the space-time continuum's creation be verified by working yourself as close as possible *to the edge of space* since space itself is also part of that which is being created. In other words, who is to say that time zero is any closer to the 'edge' of the space-time-continuum than where we stand now or that finding any edge of space gets us 'back' any closer to the creative act? Indeed, the very vocabulary we have to use to try to understand the verification problem itself demonstrates the hopelessness of the task. We have to conceive of somehow getting 'ex' the space-time continuum but we can only think of getting outside time by using spatial terms (such as edges) or, alternatively, of getting outside space by using temporal terms (such as beginnings)! Scientists may indeed be in a position to verify the development of the universe from time zero - or as close as dammit. However, this has brought them no closer to verifying creation itself. Indeed, we will never be in a position to do such a thing for there is no conceivable way for creatures like ourselves to get 'outside of' or 'before' the universe, given that we are essentially of one substance with it and that it makes no difference which 'string-theory universe' we currently find ourselves within!

Scientists are right to be excited about the discoveries they have made about the beginnings of our universe and how it has developed ever since, but wrong if they believe that this means that humanity has at last reached adulthood and can now throw away the metacosmic-creation idea as a bit of obsolescent linguistics. If we were talking about *cosmic* creation they might have a point for it is certainly true that the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and Canaanite creation stories are simply pre-scientific representational descriptions of the universe as it was experienced, which can now be set aside without any intrinsic loss. That said, if you learn to read them aright you soon find that there is little significant difference between the pictures they paint and what

modern science describes. For we have to suppose that ever since the development of our species every human being has experienced the universe in much the same way: as a place in which fitness<sup>1025</sup> is favoured and weakness in all its various guises is penalised – given the added proviso that even the best efforts of the fit turn out to be vain since the natural forces show no regard for human aspirations and always have their way in the end. However, we are not dealing with *cosmic* creation – the ordering of things within an existent universe – so all of this is immaterial.

There is, of course, no possibility that the biblical writers invented their god Yahweh to fill the gaps in their knowledge about the universe, for they did not function analytically. The accusation made against them is that they had dreamed up the idea of the metacosmic god in order to bring pie-in-the-sky comfort to a community of former marginals which had no real material prospects. But was this the case? Were the biblical writers simply fantasizing and indulging in make-believe when they wrote about their metacosmic god? I can find no evidence that they wanted their fellow Israelites to live in denial of the realities of their situation. On the contrary it seems to me that they went to considerable lengths to insist that people should remain fully conscious of their true predicament. In fact I rather fancy the boot is on the other foot: that if anyone is indulging in make believe it is modern scientists, like Richard Dawkins, who seek to blind-eye the reality of the ideological realm which the Yahwist believed, as I see it quite rightly, had appeared as a result of the development of human consciousness.

According to the Yahwist the presence of consciousness (an awareness of mortality, sexuality and morality) made human beings radically different from animals. For whereas animals behave unconsciously, humans, in ‘choosing’ to operate in this awareness, effectively put their behaviour up for examination. Human acts are viewed not simply as natural but as demonstrations of ‘free will’. In other words, whereas animals operate entirely at a lower, ‘natural’ level, humans (whether they like it or not) are seen as operating also at a superior, ‘ideological’ level<sup>1026</sup> where behaviour is judged according to notions of what is right and wrong.<sup>1027</sup> Today, though we express ourselves very differently, we still admit to the existence of these distinct levels. For example we recognise our own basic behaviour, along with the behaviour of other animals, as reflecting natural selection. However, though we may sometimes regret the fact, we are also perfectly aware that our species has, at least to some extent, broken with the law of natural selection and now develops not so much through the infinitely slow genetic processes (which still continue to operate of course) but rather through the choices which we collectively make, even to the extent of acting on some occasions to modify our own genes.<sup>1028</sup> Thus, while at one level we know that our future as participants in this universe will still be determined by cosmic laws, at another level we

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<sup>1025</sup> Understood as strength, intelligence and adaptability etc.

<sup>1026</sup> It is important to understand that this ‘free will’ is an ideological notion. All animals are capable of choosing. What they lack is a conscience which drives the choices they make.

<sup>1027</sup> I am aware that the Yahwist never spoke about ‘free will’ or used the terms ‘natural’ or ‘ideological’ to differentiate between animal and human behaviour. All he did was to supply a basic pattern in which mankind’s superior stature *vis-à-vis* the rest of creation is linked to consciousness and the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>1028</sup> By screening out genetic diseases and malformations for example.

know that it will be much more immediately influenced by our own ideological decision-making.

It seems that scientists like Dawkins do not wish to recognise the existence of this second, ideological, level (that so preoccupied the biblical writers) where development takes place as a result of human decision-making. They clearly want to reduce everything to the natural level where matters can be examined scientifically. That way they can glorify our modern achievements at the expense of the biblical tradition, pretending that the latter is nothing but a collection of primitive, and hence obsolete, scientific texts – which is absurd.<sup>1029</sup> Dawkins tells us that all of our behaviour, including our altruism, can be explained genetically, and insinuates that our contribution is so insignificant as to be of no account since the fate of our universe is determined by the nature of the cosmic forces which control it, making nonsense of anything we do.<sup>1030</sup> But, in spite of the truth of what he says, all of us (Dawkins himself included) continue, in living our lives, to distinguish between right and wrong. We continue to behave as if existence presented each of us with an important freedom and choice about how to live our lives and that how we use this freedom and answer this choice matters greatly, despite our apparent insignificance in the face of the powers driving the universe. In behaving this way all that we are doing is demonstrating that we refuse to limit our horizons to matters which science is competent to deal with, namely (from the Yahwist's standpoint) the pre-consciousness scenario of what one might call the natural universe,<sup>1031</sup> because with the arrival of free will and ideology a new universe has opened up. The world has *as a matter of fact* changed and become a far more interesting and challenging place for animals such as us to live in. The truth is that in our behaviour, if in nothing else, all of us recognise that ideological speculation, such as that involved in the idea of the metacosmic god, is not a fault which vitiates a person's contribution, but rather an absolute necessity, since no understanding of right and wrong behaviour can be achieved in any other fashion, as Dawkins himself admits. The question is not how to avoid ideological speculation but rather how to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy ideological speculation, and here science is of no earthly use.

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<sup>1029</sup> 'Western science, acting on good evidence that the moon orbits the Earth a quarter of a million miles away, using Western-designed computers and rockets, has succeeded in placing people on its surface. Tribal science, believing that the moon is just above the treetops, will never touch it outside of their dreams.' Dawkins, *River* p. 22. 'Not only is Dr. Margulis' theory of origins – the cell as an enclosed garden of bacteria – incomparably more inspiring, exciting and uplifting than the story of the Garden of Eden. It has the additional advantage of being almost certainly true.' *River* p. 46.

<sup>1030</sup> 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. ... DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.' Dawkins, *River* p. 133.

<sup>1031</sup> Of course science can deal with consciousness as a natural phenomenon. What it can't deal with is the ideological questions which consciousness poses.

*Does the metacosmic-god idea illicitly attribute purpose to the universe?*

Richard Dawkins claims that the human species is characterised by a propensity to read extraneous purposes into situations<sup>1032</sup> and he clearly believes that this is not just true of modern man but is something we have inherited from our past.

The desire to see purpose everywhere is a natural one in an animal that lives surrounded by machines, works or art, tools and other design artefacts; an animal, moreover, whose waking thoughts are dominated by its own personal goals. A car, a tin opener, a screwdriver and a pitchfork all legitimately warrant the “What is it for?” question. Our pagan forebears would have asked the same questions about thunder, eclipses, rocks and streams.<sup>1033</sup>

He sees his Christian adversaries as being preoccupied about such bogus ‘Why’ questions regarding the universe and argues that this is the result of their use of a pre-scientific mode of thought:

... you are right to ask the “why” question of a bicycle’s mudguard or the Kariba Dam, but at the very least you have no right to *assume* that the “why” question deserves an answer when it is posed about a boulder, a misfortune, Mt. Everest or the universe. Questions can be simply inappropriate, however heartfelt their framing.<sup>1034</sup>

Dawkins never actually pronounces on the thought processes of the biblical writers but we have to assume that he sees these as displaying the same defect. But is this true? Is the biblical language characteristically purpose-ridden? Certainly the ancient Mesopotamian civilisations saw purpose in the universe for they tell of the gods endowing Adapa with a privileged position within it just so that he may relieve them of irksome toil. However, by introducing the metacosmic-god idea biblical writers effectively do away with this notion. They are at pains to show that their god Yahweh hasn’t any needs which Adam and Eve can meet. As they see it, Yahweh created the universe with no purpose at all in mind other than that it should fulfil itself: be fruitful and multiply. In this way they make the same point that modern atheists do: that the only purpose in the universe is the ideological one which we, often unconsciously, give ourselves in order to fulfil our desires. It is true, of course, that Christians have sometimes claimed that God created human beings to love him and to be loved by him,<sup>1035</sup> but from a biblical standpoint this has to be rejected since it is clear that Yahweh is portrayed as experiencing no need either to love or to be loved. But doesn’t the Jewish Bible speak of a future when everyone, including opponents, will bow the knee and recognise Yahweh? It certainly does, but this is an eschatological image, put forward not as a state we should foolishly strive towards but as an assurance that, despite appearances, right behaviour will in fact triumph. It is therefore a vindication and not a purpose. Dawkins, of course, sees none of this for he never, as far as I can see, consciously takes ideological considerations into account when dealing with the Bible.

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<sup>1032</sup> ‘We humans have purpose on the brain. ... Show us almost any object or process, and it is hard for us to resist the “Why” question – “What is it for?” question.’ Dawkins, *River* p. 96. ‘*Homo sapiens* is a deeply purpose-ridden species.’ p. 104.

<sup>1033</sup> Dawkins, *River* p. 96

<sup>1034</sup> Dawkins, *River* p. 97.

<sup>1035</sup> ‘... in order to comprehend much regarding the [human] race, we must comprehend something of Him “for whose pleasure they are and were created.”’ A. B. Davidson, *Prophecy* p. 1. c.f. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*: Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.



All this having been said there is one connection in which the Bible does clearly speak of a purpose and that is when speaking of Israel's election. This idea implies that, though Yahweh had no purpose in creating the universe and mankind, he did have something in mind when he chose Israel to be his servant. But this is a matter we will have to leave till later since here we are discussing the metacosmic god, not election.

*Is the metacosmic-god idea invalid in being a projection?*

One final criticism of the metacosmic-god idea remains to be dealt with: the contention that it is invalid because, like all religious ideas, it is just a projection. This is the objection which Marxists have classically put to Christians. In fact there are two basic criticisms here. The first is that, in being a mere notion, the metacosmic-god idea is a fallible human construct, not an undeniable reality. I accept this point of course. It seems to me vain to pretend, as some biblicists do, that unlike ordinary religious ideas those in the Bible come directly from God as revelations containing no human interpretation.<sup>1036</sup> However, the fact that the metacosmic-god idea is the result of human guess-work does not of itself render it invalid. Even the best scientific ideas are germinated by a combination of observation and imagination and consequently involve some projection. What is more, guess-work is involved not only in so far as a scientific theory falsifies the picture of the phenomenon it describes but also in so far as it gives a revealing and useful description. This means that while the concept of projection may be illuminating, in explaining how religious ideas are germinated, it cannot be used as a criterion for establishing the extent to which such ideas are true or false; useful or useless. It is certainly the case that both religious belief and scientific theory are the result of hypothesising but, as regards their validity, so what?

*Is the metacosmic-god idea invalid in stemming from a biased viewpoint?*

There is, however, another and much more interesting way in which the projection-criticism is used. Here the claim is that the metacosmic-god idea does not stem from an objective examination of the universe but rather from a frankly biased and partisan interpretation of the facts.<sup>1037</sup> Basically, the understanding is that the Hebrews, as a group of powerless no-users, found it impossible to face up to the harsh, competitive reality of the cosmic order and so dreamed up the metacosmic-god idea to provide themselves with a fictitious hope.<sup>1038</sup>

Though I see no evidence to suggest that the metacosmic-god idea was a deliberate piece of make-believe (after all, as far as we know, Israel was the only community in the ancient Near East to deny herself the comforting fantasy of an after-life) I do accept the basic contention that it was a projection of the power-interests of the Hebrew community. As a phenomenon within the space-time continuum the metacosmic-god

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<sup>1036</sup> e.g. John Bright. See p. 60 above.

<sup>1037</sup> 'If the religion that accompanies and justifies and energizes statism (i.e. the Canaanite religion) is a projection of power interests there is every reason to believe that the religion that accompanies and justifies and energizes tribalism or intertribalism (i.e. Yahwism) is also a projection of power interests'. Gottwald, *Tribes*, p. 601

<sup>1038</sup> Gottwald himself does not make this claim. It is, however, the kind of criticism one regularly comes across in everyday conversation with atheists.

idea must have had an earthly genesis and I can think of no more likely candidate for this mothering process than the socio-political matrix of the group which conceived it.<sup>1039</sup> It seems to me perfectly proper therefore that we should see it as issuing from the Hebrews' experience as a dustbinned people within the ancient Near East ... *though not as a bit of escapist pretending*. All the evidence shows that the metacosmic-god idea came about as a result of the Hebrews' fundamental conviction that, however much they themselves had been responsible for their calamitous situation as the instruments of their own fate, there was no ideological (political, ethical, moral) justification for their social trashing or for the trashing of anyone for that matter. For though they were obviously aware that civilization-folk considered (as they still do today) that it was perfectly defensible, and indeed natural, to trash<sup>1040</sup> people who were of no use or who get in the way, they believed that, properly understood, it was utterly unjustifiable ... that it was contrary to man's and woman's deepest instincts and humanity ... that it was a transgression against the hidden grain of the universe – or however you wish to express this innermost conviction. Given this understanding, that the metacosmic-god idea did indeed stem from the Hebrews' peculiar experience as a community of marginals, the question is whether such a genesis makes the idea itself, and the underlying conviction about what constitutes unethical behaviour, dubious, as atheists so often imply?

What we are talking about here is the validity of a conviction concerning the character of a recognised object, which results from viewing the said object from a particular viewpoint (the object in this case being the new universe of choice which results from consciousness, its essential characteristic being a hidden grain which gives positive or negative value to particular choices). It is obvious that the adoption of a viewpoint is necessary in order to observe any phenomenon and it is well understood that such a viewpoint, while enabling vision, also paradoxically obscures it. For when you place yourself at a particular observation point certain features of the observed phenomenon will necessarily remain obscured.<sup>1041</sup> Because of this the name of the game is not to try and find an *unbiased* view (which does not exist) but to look for *the best position* to observe the characteristic of the object in question (it being understood that this is not a scenario in which it is legitimate to wander around *changing* your observation point at will).

So what is the best position from which to view the political, ethical and moral grain of this new universe of human choice which we humans alone inhabit and which arose when our species first achieved awareness?<sup>1042</sup> There is, of course, a huge, nagging problem which raises its head here and prevents us from immediately tackling this question: there exists no way of finally deciding whether the new universe of human choice is a *real* universe which, in coming from the hands of a metacosmic creator,

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<sup>1039</sup> Again, some biblical historians deny this, arguing that though many religious ideas are indeed the projections of power interests Israel's religious ideas, as revelations, were not. But, of course, revelation, in so far as it is seen as 'a message from outside the space time continuum', is not a scientifically verifiable process and so cannot be considered an appropriate candidate for this mothering process (however true it may be from an eschatological standpoint).

<sup>1040</sup> In our day usually imprisoning.

<sup>1041</sup> e.g. those on its far side.

<sup>1042</sup> See p. 171 above.

offers a *real* way of determining right-or-wrong ethical choices (as theists believe) or whether it is simply a mental screen on which all of us project and play out our interests (as Marxist atheists maintain). It has to be said that this problem is just as much an issue for Marxists as for Christians. Marxists have great difficulty in working out whether they should advocate an ethic or not. Mostly they argue that ethics is incompatible with Marxism. They see Marxism as constituting a scientific and empirical approach in which the social data are analysed to reveal that civilisation is progressing in a determined<sup>1043</sup> manner, through revolutionary changes, towards a classless society.<sup>1044</sup> In terms of this scientific and empirical stance ethical notions (along with ideology) are simply judged as part of the superstructure of the society and, as such, reflections of class interests. However, inevitably, it turns out that this is an unsatisfactory position since in real life Marxists find themselves not simply coldly analysing situations and prognosticating on their future development but also advocating revolutionary change on the basis that the present social situation and its values are dehumanising, whereas those of revolutionaries like themselves are liberating.<sup>1045</sup> In other words they find themselves, whether they like it or not, maintaining that some values are more valuable than others, at which point it is difficult for them to go on arguing either that they advocate no ethic or that value and right-or-wrong are simply a matter of the way in which behaviour is judged in the light of class interests.

However, it is easy to exaggerate the importance of this disagreement between Marxists and Christians.<sup>1046</sup> For in point of fact no serious person, whether theist or atheist, believes that this universe of human choice, which we bring to mind when we ask ourselves what sort of world we want to live in, is ethically neutral (i.e. grainless), that

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<sup>1043</sup> Determined though not inevitable.

<sup>1044</sup> 'The nature of Marx's views on morality and ethics has long been a matter of considerable dispute. One widespread view is that Marx had no ethics, he rejected morality, and envisioned a communism beyond both. Marx is supposed to have founded a science which sought in an objective, morally neutral manner to understand the origin, growth, and collapse of capitalism as well as the ultimate succession of communism. One only has to read in the history of Marxism to appreciate how generally this view has been defended. ... Accordingly, it can be said without exaggeration that it has seemed to many that it is misleading at best, wrong-headed at worst, to speak of Marx having an ethics. He simply does not fit into the categories into which we expect those having an ethics and reflecting on morality to fit.' George G. Brenkert, *Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, (Routledge & Kegan: 1983) p. 1

<sup>1045</sup> 'Marx was not, as one would expect a scientist to be, a neutral, dispassionate observer in his writings. This is as evident in his writings on political economy as it is in his newspaper articles. In *Capital*, for example, he condemns the egoism, exploitation, estrangement, degradation, etc. which capitalism brings in its train. Marx's writings are pervaded by a normative and partisan atmosphere. His commitment to the particular kind of social order which he sees his work as advancing is always obvious and constantly present. Further, this commitment is not simply a personal commitment, but one which he clearly believes that others should share.... If Marx were a scientist without an ethics, it is unclear how we are to understand his many comments that communism will constitute a 'higher' plane of existence for humanity, that there is a 'progressive' nature to history, and that communism will institute a 'true realm' of freedom.' Brenkert, *Ethics*, p. 4

<sup>1046</sup> The metaphysical argument between theism and atheism is a relatively unimportant matter which should never be confused with the crucial biblical argument between Yahwism and Baalism. This latter argument is essentially political, not religious, and concerns the question of the proper use of human power and creativity. It seems to me relatively unimportant whether a person inclines to a theistic or atheistic stance since in both cases his/her human performance will be judged not by this but by political/ethical criteria: as the Bible itself asserts, by their attitude towards the marginals.

it is a sort of *tabula rasa* which permits us to choose any kind of selfish interest and get away with it. For we all know that there will be consequences of the choices we make, and we are all aware that these consequences are becoming increasingly difficult to handle as our power to affect our situation grows. Given this predicament it is surely ever more important to determine what is the best viewpoint from which to observe this ‘grain’ which stands out over against our projected interests. For it is only by doing so that we will be able to find out how to go about making fundamentally worthwhile choices. Otherwise we will certainly end up destroying everything in the name of class or self-interest, including ourselves.

I suggest that insofar as Marxists would accept the way in which I have formulated this question about the best observation point from which to view the new universe’s political (and economic), ethical and moral grain, their response would be that the optimum position was one of solidarity with the working class. For in being the lowest class in society capable of bringing about revolution the proletariat is clearly, as they see it, destined to usher in the panacea of the classless society. It is hardly surprising that this proposal stuck so seriously in the gullet of twentieth century Christian bourgeois society since it was its selfish interests which Marxist analysis challenged and exposed. That said, however revealing this was, the light of Marxism did little to illuminate the dark recesses of its own movement. In this regard, three basic criticisms have to be made of the Marxist proposition as I have described it:<sup>1047</sup>

1. In choosing to make ‘the best observation point’ a position of solidarity with one of the classes *within* society Marxism is inevitably seen by everyone else as taking sides in a power struggle and therefore as illegitimately putting the interests of one section of society above the others. The inevitable consequence is that change has to be brought about by coercion and, as we all know, such a change never lasts but is inevitably reversed just as soon as the repression is lifted.
2. There is no persuasive reason why the choices made in a classless society will be more farsighted and less harmful than those made in a class society. It would, for example, be hard to deny that the aristocracy has a better track record in preserving the natural environment than Communism.
3. There is no reason to suppose that a classless society will be any less ferocious in garbaging those who don’t fit in or who actively oppose it. Indeed recent experience would suggest that Communism, in espousing a higher ideal, marginalizes more people than either feudalism or capitalism.

In pressing its own criticisms against Marxism, twentieth century bourgeois Christianity, for its part, proposed a ‘biblical’ stance (which in truth was anything but biblical). What this amounted to was a reformist line in which the biblical tradition was appealed to as *an impossible ethic*.<sup>1048</sup> This slogan implies two things. First, that as an impossible ethic the Bible’s demands should be seen as constituting a standard of

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<sup>1047</sup> In studying the following three points it has to be born in mind that we are talking about the new universe of human choice and not the universe of the natural, that is, Dawinian law. The problem is that, for the most part, Marxism conducts its argument in the latter domain where our points are not relevant so we are obliged to deal with what we believe they would say if they agreed to discuss matters in terms of this new universe of human choice.

<sup>1048</sup> See for example the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr and more recently Richard Holloway.

perfection unsullied by human interests which are, as such, applicable to everyone. Second, that as an impossible ethic the Bible's demands should in no way be understood naively or taken at face value. Another way of stating this duality is to say that the Bible places on everyone an obligation of self-denial and charity but that it does this in such a way as never to threaten their privileges. In short, this sort of 'biblical' self-denial does not imply sacrificing your position and this sort of 'biblical' charity does not mean reducing your power!

It is interesting to compare this overall twentieth century result with the Yahwist's very different Hebrew proposal: that the best observation point from which to view the grain of the new universe is that of solidarity with the despised outcasts. The first thing to say about this proposal is that it constitutes a materialist stance. That is to say, it is not arrived at idealistically, by dreaming up a concept of perfection and then pretending that this was vouchsafed by revelation. Rather it is arrived at by means of a solidarity with a very particular group of ostracised people. Being a materialist stance there is no attempt to disguise the fact that sacrifices of privilege will be unavoidable since there is no power or influence to be gained in allying oneself with such people. This would seem to position Yahwism *close* to Marxism and *against* liberal Christianity.

In choosing as its observation point a position of solidarity with a group that was *exterior* to civilisation, and therefore not a social class at all, biblical Yahwism offers several important correctives to Marxism. First, it refuses to treat the rubbing of people as an inevitable consequence of social organisation and instead views it as a mark of social degradation for which there can be no possible excuse, even in a Communist state. Second, it refuses to make choices which are determined by class interest and instead chooses solidarity with those who have been effectively excluded from the power game whether by feudalism, capitalism *or* communism. Third, it refuses all human choices which constitute strength pitted against strength and instead chooses, controversially, to pit weakness against strength.<sup>1049</sup> Here, therefore, there can be no question of coercion except in a completely contradictory sense – as when the prophets felt themselves *driven* to deliver a message which they knew all civilisation people would find unacceptable.

There are other atheist positions besides that of Marxism, of course. Anarchists, for example, are happy to openly avow that right-and-wrong exist as more than mere reflections of class interests. As they see it we all naturally desire to do good and it is only the institution of the state which corrupts our human situation.<sup>1050</sup> How does this stance compare with biblical Yahwism? Judging by his Adam and Eve myth the Yahwist would certainly have agreed that in being endowed with consciousness (in his terms, in *choosing* to possess the knowledge of good and evil) humans all have the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. And this would seem to imply that, all other things being equal, human beings start out with a bias: i.e. wishing to do what is right

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<sup>1049</sup> This is not pacifism since the right for the weak to defend themselves by violence is recognised.

<sup>1050</sup> According to Bakunin man is born desiring good. It is only the institution of the State which is undeniably corrupting and violent. 'Liberty, morality, and the human dignity of man consist precisely in that man does good not because he is ordered to do so, but because he conceives it, wants it, and loves it.' Mikhail Bakunin, *Ethics: Morality of the State*. From *The political Philosophy of Bakunin* by G.P. Maximoff (New York: the Free Press, 1953).

and to avoid doing what is wrong. However, the Yahwist clearly did not want to let human beings off the hook by suggesting, as anarchists appear to do, that wrongdoing comes about as it were by accident – as an unforeseen consequence of the creation of the state.<sup>1051</sup> That said, he equally clearly did not want to imply that evil comes about by Man’s deliberate choice – as Christian (and Jewish?) tradition has argued over the centuries, in the doctrine of the fall. He wanted to suggest that the truth is quite different. To tease out what this was we will have to solicit the help of a renowned twentieth century Jewish scholar.

In his seminal work *I and Thou*<sup>1052</sup> Martin Buber explained the Yahwist’s position by means of the phenomenon of empathy. He did not use this actual word, any more than the Yahwist did. However, empathy is certainly the word *we* would use nowadays to discuss what he was on about in 1923. What Martin Buber actually talked about was the phenomenon of the discovery of the other. He explained what was involved by comparing *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships, *I-It* being the way we, as animals, naturally relate to our environment and *I-Thou* being the way in which the arrival of consciousness permits us to relate to our environment should we choose to do so. His basic claim (which I believe was substantially correct) was that the Yahwist saw consciousness in terms of this new ability, to treat the other as a *Thou*, that is, to empathize. Thus, human beings, on becoming conscious, effectively became able to put themselves in the other’s position whoever or whatever this other might be.<sup>1053</sup> This made it possible for them to see that some of their actions, which in terms of the natural universe appeared perfectly normal, were in truth (i.e. in the terms of the new universe of choice) egocentric and wrong. In other words, in achieving awareness humans suddenly became conscious that much of their animal behaviour was no longer acceptable – not because it was intrinsically wicked (‘fallen’) but because now, as aware human beings, they were conscious that they were obliged to act with empathy and responsibility. This whole predicament is wonderfully revealed by the Yahwist in the picture of Adam and Eve suddenly realising that they were naked, and scrambling in acute embarrassment to hide – though, of course, you have to be aware of the Yahwist’s sex-marker technique to see what he was on about.

Writing to The Humanist<sup>1054</sup> one anarchist describes this human capacity to empathise, which demarcates right as over against wrong behaviour, in terms of ‘kindness’:

‘[K]indness’ [is] a concept and action (in some instances courageous) which can be considered a determinant as well as a test of right conduct. ... An anarchist, atheist vegan, I strive to be a ‘good person’ – by my standards, on my own terms. This to me means thinking, speaking, treating as kindly as I can every being and every thing I encounter, as I try to improve myself and my world.

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<sup>1051</sup> Biblical Yahwism certainly sees civilization (Babylon) and a leisured environment (Eden) as situations in which corruption blossoms but it does not see either situation as intrinsically corrupt and corrupting which is how anarchists view the state.

<sup>1052</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).

<sup>1053</sup> I have a slight problem with this latter affirmation. For while I have no problems with the idea that we should generally treat nature as a *Thou* I can’t help asking myself what it would mean for humans to treat the smallpox virus in the same manner?

<sup>1054</sup> An internet magazine of critical enquiry and social concern.

Of course Martin Buber preferred to use the word ‘love’ (I think ‘kindness’ – which is less pretentious – is in some ways a better description, at least to start off with). Buber also insisted that in the Yahwist’s text this whole *I-Thou* empathy business was controlled by the *Human-Yahweh* relationship – though he never satisfactorily explained quite why this was so. I have suggested that the *Human/God of the marginals* relationship defined the marginal view-point as the best position from which to observe the nature of this empathy (which itself delineates right from wrong behaviour). Only the marginal can truly appreciate what it means to be treated as an *It* instead of, as should be the case, as a *Thou*. It has to be said that such a view-point is seriously lacking in Anarchism which, in comparison with both Marxism and biblical Yahwism, bases its motivation on a very general and low-level notion of humanity and kindness.

Whatever the reader concludes as regards these differing positions it surely has to be conceded that when it comes to accounting for right and wrong behaviour both Marxism and Anarchism base their explanations on observation *and* interpretation (i.e. projection) and that in this regard they are no different from biblical Yahwism. Of course, Anarchists might insist that in basing their scenario on the interests of humanity as a whole they offer an unbiased viewpoint which, as such, is superior to the proletarian bias of Marxism and the marginal bias of biblical Yahwism. However, it could be argued, as I have done, that in adopting a position of solidarity with the marginals – which is to say an entity with no common interest apart from the basic human desire not to be excluded – the undoubted bias of the Yahwistic position ceases to be a cause for objection and instead becomes a vital asset. For is it not undeniable that the existential place which marginals occupy provides the only observation point with a perfect view of the behaviour which we all know is constantly undermining our efforts to build an enduring civilisation: this being our natural inclination both as individuals and groups to try and get our own way by walking over each other? Given the critical importance of correcting our own casual, everyday, selfish behaviour who would exchange the Yahwists’ insight for anarchism’s lowest-ethical-common-denominator approach?

#### *The Justification of One Religious Idea as over against Another*

We must now turn to the question about the possibility of discriminating between religious ideas. If we are right in maintaining that the Hebrews’ religious idea of the metacosmic god is in itself perfectly legitimate, if not for obvious reasons demonstrably true, are we justified in distinguishing between valid and invalid uses of it, and so of discerning what are justified and unjustified religious ideas? Would we be warranted, for example, in claiming that creating the idea of the metacosmic god for a ‘revolutionary’ purpose was perfectly licit while exploiting the same idea for a revisionist purpose was not? In other words at what point and for what reason does a perfectly valid religious idea become invalid?

*Conversion depends on universal truths available to all.*

Clearly we must avoid the trap of attempting to justify the Yahwist’s creation of the metacosmic idea simply because we like his ‘revolutionary’ ideology, rejecting P’s

usage because we can't stand his revisionist ideas (or, indeed, *vice versa*). Such judgements are without value, not only because there is no reason to suppose that what we like and dislike is particularly significant but also because religion cannot be justified by ideology any more than ideology can be justified by religion. *Both have to vindicate themselves before the higher court of global human experience*. After all, it is commonplace for people to experience unease when confronted with strange religious ideas, just as it is for them to be upset when ideological views they do not share are thrust upon them. Ideological and religious world-views are created to forge unity amongst specific groups of people, whether economic classes or geographic communities. So if you happen not to belong to the group in question it is natural for you to experience as alienating the ideology or religion designed to unify it, since it will inevitably encapsulate a world-view that takes no account of what makes you who you are. This means that it cannot possibly be acceptable for anyone to use religious or ideological arguments as a form of group pressure to get others to convert. Conversion can only be properly advocated on account of some superior and overriding motivation which is available to, if not in fact necessarily shared by, *everyone*.<sup>1055</sup>

The problem has always been that such an overriding principle, without which civilisation is held to ransom by warring ideological and religious factions, has proved impossibly difficult to find. It was presumably for this reason that the Greeks of the ancient world sought to usher in civilised peace by introducing the great negative principle of tolerance and, in the absence of anything better, this has remained the great, underlying, civilizing principle ever since. Constantine, for his part, sought to achieve something more positive by making Christianity the official religion of his empire. In modern times, reason in the form of science has been proposed as the answer to civilisation's dilemma, whereas Marxists, for their part, have advocated working-class solidarity as the solution of the problem since the proletariat, as the lowest class with revolutionary potential, is, as they see it, destined to usher in the panacea of the classless society. Though I question whether any of these approaches, taken either singly or in combination, are adequate to the task of ending civilisation's ideological and religious wars, I would suggest that, with the possible exception of Constantine's efforts,<sup>1056</sup> they do at least make their contributions in the right place and in the right way. What I mean is that they appeal to *worldwide experience*, which is to say to truths which by their very nature are discernible by everyone<sup>1057</sup> as opposed to truths involving private revelations<sup>1058</sup> which are in fact nothing more than

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<sup>1055</sup> The question of conversion is crucial when gauging the validity of religious ideas for it could be argued that a group of individuals is entitled to believe any old rubbish just so long as they don't inflict it on anyone else. This defence, which simply serves to cloud the issue, is invalid when it comes to the business of conversion, making the issue of conversion the crucial test in gauging validity.

<sup>1056</sup> It is easy to denigrate Constantine's achievement, seeing him as manipulating Christianity for his own political ends, thereby ruining it in the process. There is, of course, some truth in this criticism but is it all that has to be said? Did not Constantine rightly recognise that Christianity was on to something which civilisation needed even though neither he nor it were altogether clear what this was?

<sup>1057</sup> Even if not everyone chooses to admit to it.

<sup>1058</sup> Sometimes labelled as religious truths, wrongly to my mind since the metacosmic god of the marginals is a religious truth which comes by way of a common revelation to all human beings. In other words a religious 'truth' may be put forward as something disclosed in a private revelation and so be qualified as fraudulent in my terms but it may equally be described as a realisation of something which has always been available to everyone even though everyone has turned their backs on it.



the rationalisations of narrow group-interests. I maintain that in unbiased situations all sane human individuals instinctively recognise the guiding principle that *one is only justified in calling for ideological or religious conversion if one does so by appealing to some overriding universal truth*. So we will now use this guiding principle to pass judgement on the biblical ideas we have just examined.

*The validity of Sabbath observance, food laws, circumcision and Passover celebration.* We will begin by reviewing the four mid-range religious notions found in the Genesis texts and attributed to the priestly writer. We have shown that none of these ideas are derived from the god-of-the-marginals notion, which means that they cannot be justified in the same way as the metacosmic idea itself. Indeed, the texts themselves make it quite clear that in establishing these religious practices there was no intention of appealing to human experience, global or otherwise. Sabbath observance was not advocated by the priestly writer on the basis that experience shows that people need rest and that they operate less efficiently when deprived of it.<sup>1059</sup> It was advocated purely on the basis that God himself chose to rest after creating the universe (there being no indication that he was tired and needed to do so) and commanded Israel to do likewise, and the same thing holds true of the other three mid-range ideas. These therefore *have to be seen as ideas put forward as revelations in the form of private messages from a transcendent metacosmic god delivered to a select few. This means that, however much we may feel personally attached to them, they are quite illicit as principles for conversion; they lack the authority pertaining to universal truths verifiable by all and sundry.*

It could be argued, of course, that the priestly writer never envisaged using such ideas for the purpose of conversion, post-exilic Israel being an inward looking community of the pure. Unlike the early Christian Church, therefore, the returning exiles were not in the business of going out and trying to persuade foreigners to adopt their ways. However, the important question is not the tactical one – are we to stay at home and put on a convincing demonstration of radical solidarity here or should we go out into the world and demonstrate radical solidarity amongst foreigners? – but rather the final objective: world conversion. Revisionist Israel could only, with justice, be excused for espousing such religious ideas if she eschewed a universal strategy of world transformation and there is no indication, as far as I know, that she did so. Had she done so then the world could have looked on her religious practices simply as legitimate expressions of her individuality, to be treasured along with the multifarious and colourful folklore which enriched life all over the planet. However, clearly the adoption of such a partial strategy, aimed simply at the preservation of Israel's special identity (as opposed to a universal strategy concerned about world transformation), would have meant abandoning the metacosmic principle itself and, as we have shown, revisionist writers were in the habit of glorifying the metacosmic principle, not ditching it.<sup>1060</sup>

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<sup>1059</sup> A truth rediscovered in Britain during the war when for a short period a misguided attempt was made to introduce the seven day working week.

<sup>1060</sup> See pp. 133 and 195 above.

*The validity of the laws in the biblical codes.*

What judgement should be passed on the numerous laws found in the biblical codes? The situation here is clearly a good deal more ambiguous for, whilst one sometimes gets the impression that such laws were seen purely and simply as the private revelations of the will of a transcendent god to his people, to be taken simply on trust and put into practice as such, at others one gets the distinct impression that they were seen quite differently, as ways of actualising the god-of-the-marginals ideology by spelling out in real-life terms what radical solidarity implied. This distinction is of course critical when it comes to the question of deciding to what extent such ancient laws can properly be said to apply to people living today, as, for example, in the modern debate about homosexuality in the Church. For if a person is convinced that the Hebrews were right about the revelation we all, as humans, receive about the god-of-the-marginals and about the need for a person to live a life of radical solidarity, loving the neighbour as oneself, then surely he or she will wish to obey the spirit which underlies so many of these biblical laws. That said, such a person will surely, not for a single moment, wish to fall into the trap of lumping all these laws together, seeing them as constituting divine revelations which if strictly obeyed would of themselves bring salvation. For that would be clearly illicit *even if, in the case of certain biblical laws (those attributable to P and his friends), it was how they were obviously intended*. It would constitute the kind of legalism which both Jesus and his disciple Paul ceaselessly strove against. In other words, my criticism of those misguided people who wield the Bible against homosexuals is not that they are exegetically in error but the fact that in seeking to use the law to undermine its spirit they show themselves to be the worst kind of hypocrites, worse even than the scribes and Pharisees who openly admitted that Jesus and Paul were on the other side of the fence. All that can be said of such people<sup>1061</sup> is that the more they dig out their exegeses the more they dig their graves, or as Jesus himself said ‘Let the dead bury their dead.’”

*The validity of the diverse uses of the metacosmic idea.*

We now finally come to the crucial question as to the validity of the various ways in which the metacosmic idea itself is employed in the Bible. As we have already noted on numerous occasions the Priestly writer’s usage is characterised by an abandonment of the materially ascertained<sup>1062</sup> god-of-the-marginals notion which formerly underpinned it; and also by an exploitation of the idea itself to authorise any number of new religious ideas purely on his declaration of the metacosmic god’s say-so. This can only mean that insofar as the Priestly writer sought to project a universalistic outlook his usage has to be pronounced invalid since no one could possibly pretend for a single minute that it was based on any universally ascertained truth. Indeed, the whole point of the priestly writer’s deity as the *transcendent* metacosmic god was that he was beyond our ken. In sharp contrast we are obliged to validate the Yahwist’s usage of the metacosmic idea since it was based firmly on the universally ascertainable god-of-the-

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<sup>1061</sup> See for example Robert A.J. Gagnon *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon, 2001).

<sup>1062</sup> Materially ascertained in the sense that everyone if they care to look can find it in their conscience as Martin Buber rightly saw. We all know in our hearts, however much it kills us, that we have no right whatsoever to dustbin the other.

marginals notion. What is more, *nothing further was independently deduced from this metacosmic idea since, as we shall see,*<sup>1063</sup> *all of the other religious ideas in the Yahwist's repertoire are directly deducible from the foundational god-of-the-marginals principle.*<sup>1064</sup> It would seem therefore that even before the ancient Greeks had introduced the idea of tolerance, as an interim measure to rescue civilisation from the blight of ideological and religious disagreement, the Hebrews had already hit upon the fundamental principle making a healthy civilisation possible ... only no one else wanted to acknowledge the fact. For the truth is that the Hebrew principle (that the marginal's perspective is infinitely superior to *all* class perspectives, making solidarity with outcasts a necessary prerequisite for all civilisation folk) appears to us to take all the enjoyment out of life, so obsessed are we as a race by the craving for privilege – to possess something others don't have.

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<sup>1063</sup> We still have one further religious idea to study. See next chapter.

<sup>1064</sup> My argument here is *not* that the evident validity of the god-of-the-marginals idea validates theism, which in my opinion, like atheism, cannot be validated. All I am saying is that the Yahwist was perfectly justified in making room for his marginal viewpoint in such a way as to emphasise its evident superiority in the ideological domain and that this position holds true so long as he refrained from making anything further of this superiority by arguing, for example, that it meant that there was a life after death or that homosexuality was a sin. This superiority of the marginal viewpoint is, after all, the basis of the whole shaming exercise. For it stands to reason that a person can only be shamed by that which is self-evident (universally evident to everyone even if everyone but the marginal is engaged in denying it). The inference from all of this is that the Hebrew metacosmic-god idea should be understood as an ideological stance justifying the superiority of the marginal viewpoint and not as a bit of metaphysics or, worse still, primitive physics.



## Chapter 15

### **The Strategic Idea: 'Election' for World Salvation.**

We now turn to the fourth and final idea on Davidson's list: the strategic notion of redemption. In the chapter heading I have used the 'election' formula because this was the way in which the biblical writers themselves habitually spoke about Israel's strategic idea – though I have chosen to put the word in inverted commas in order not to foreclose on what it signifies.

#### *Election as a Dirty Word*

Given the current antipathy in our pluralistic society to the notion of an elect or chosen people, readers are likely to be tempted to skip this chapter. Let me counsel against such a step. We may find election an intrinsically objectionable notion. However, the importance of the word 'elect' or 'chosen' in the Bible is hard to overestimate for though it was not employed in the Yahwist's texts it undoubtedly came to be the traditional way of expressing the historical sense given by the Hebrews to the strategy of their 'revolutionary' movement. As such it encapsulated the community's awareness that, *as a group of former marginals wedded to the idea of radical solidarity*, they were the *only* instrument capable of bringing about world transformation.<sup>1065</sup> This is not the way they put it, of course, for they were only too aware of their unworthiness for such a task. What the Yahwist wrote was that 'way back in Egypt the god of the marginals had made it known to their forefathers that if they started standing up for themselves he would defend them and bring them to a land of their own. Later writers put the matter more succinctly, saying simply that God had chosen Israel as his servant. It seems to me that this idea is so crucial in understanding the central biblical story that if you fail to appreciate what it is about you relinquish all hope of understanding what Jesus intended to do with his life. This being the case, readers who wish to come to grips with my god-of-the-marginals thesis should do their best to overcome their natural distaste for the idea of election and approach this chapter with all their wits about them.

Interestingly enough, this antipathy towards the idea of election was something shared by twentieth century biblicalists. The last major work on the subject in English was written as long ago as 1950 by H. H. Rowley and even then he complained that the doctrine had received little attention. Indeed he quoted an article written by G. E. Wright in which the latter observed that 'modern scholars have done little with this doctrine, perhaps in no small measure because they felt they could not take its validity seriously'. I cannot help comparing this remarkable aversion of Old Testament scholars to the idea of Israel as God's chosen people with the equally remarkable disregard of twentieth century New Testament scholars for the idea of Jesus as God's

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<sup>1065</sup> See above p. 147.

light.<sup>1066</sup> Doing so draws attention to a number of interesting points: Both ideas (election and God's light) constitute a response to the same basic question: What are the strategic implications of the god-of-the-marginals idea for those who take it seriously? Both ideas result from drawing the same conclusion: Commitment to the god-of-the-marginals idea necessitates the adoption of a *reactive strategy*, involving an eschewing of the power of the strong and an embracing of the power of the weak.<sup>1067</sup> Such a conclusion was unanimously blind-eyed by twentieth century scholarship which insisted on seeing Moses and Jesus as espousing *proactive strategies* aimed at redeeming or recreating the fallen world in accordance with the revealed nature of the transcendent, metacosmic god.<sup>1068</sup>

Let me at this point be brutally frank. What I see here is a naked ideological struggle between the 'revolutionary'<sup>1069</sup> writers of both testaments who advocate their 'revolutionary', god of the marginals<sup>1070</sup> and twentieth century scholars who do their best not to notice him by concentrating instead on the priestly revisionists' transcendent, metacosmic god.<sup>1071</sup> Traditional scholars will perhaps protest that this accusation can't possibly include them since in dealing with the Bible they specifically eschew ideology, treating the texts in a rigorously religious manner. But the simple fact is that *this in itself constitutes an ideological stance*, an attempt to suffocate the Bible's unacceptable witness to the god of the marginals, by misconstruing it as a religious text solely concerned with a revelation of the transcendent, metacosmic god.

In this chapter religious stances will be contrasted unfavourably with ideological ones on a number of occasions. I will try hard to keep my meaning clear; however, it is possible that readers will find themselves mistakenly concluding that I am, for some reason, in favour of ideology against religion, which is not the case. If I am against anything it is the use of religion to cover up oppressive ideological stances. As for religion itself I try to take a neutral stance since I wish to conduct an open dialogue with believers and atheists alike as well as those who, like myself, choose to stand between! Let me explain what I mean, by using the example of the Yahwist and the priestly writer. I advocate the Yahwist's position as over against that of the priestly writer describing the relationship between them as *a struggle between an ideological and a religious stance*. However, that does not mean that I consider ideology good and religion bad. The fact is that what I am trying to depict is an ideological conflict between two people who not only expressed themselves religiously but who also took their religion seriously. Why then do I describe the Yahwist's position as ideological and the priestly writer's stance as religious? I do so because the Yahwist, in advocating his god of the marginals, places his ideology (radical solidarity) up front whereas the priestly writer, in advocating his metacosmic god, hides his ideology

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<sup>1066</sup> i.e. the light to lighten the Gentiles. See above p. 42.

<sup>1067</sup> See above p. 130.

<sup>1068</sup> Without using the word metacosmic of course!

<sup>1069</sup> I remind readers that this word is in inverted commas because what is designated is a social upheaval (first becoming last and last first) brought about *reactively* and not, as is usually the case, *proactively*.

<sup>1070</sup> Who, of course, as such is also the metacosmic god.

<sup>1071</sup> Christian scholars magnify the transcendent, metacosmic god while atheistic ones denounce him, both being guilty of avoiding the issue which is the god of the marginals and not the transcendent, metacosmic god.

(authoritarianism) behind a religious stance of transcendence.<sup>1072</sup> So what you actually see when dealing with the Yahwist is a ‘revolutionary’ ideological position (our god is the god of the marginals<sup>1073</sup>) whereas what you see when dealing with the priestly writer looks like a religious position (our god is the transcendent god) *even though in truth it is a revisionist, authoritarian, ideological position*<sup>1074</sup> *in disguise*.

My business is with helping people, if I can, to see first what is going on ideologically in biblical texts and second what is going on ideologically in modern discussions about these texts. This is a complicated exercise because religion is always there muddying the water. Both the Yahwist and the priestly writer use religious language (mythology) when describing their ideological positions. That itself is a bit of a problem but it is not too difficult to overcome. Added to this, the priestly writer – though not the Yahwist – purposely disguises his ideological stance by hiding it behind a religious smoke-screen, claiming authority for himself and others by divine revelation. The Yahwist avoids such trickery, though he too adds a significant religious rider in claiming that his god, the god of the marginals, unlike the ordinary *cosmic* gods is *metacosmic*. However, he covers himself by refusing to make anything out of this idea in terms of additional religious notions and obligations apart from the prohibition of images.<sup>1075</sup> When it comes to the modern debate about the biblical texts religion introduces further complications. This is because the Bible has come to be seen by both believers and non-believers as a Christian text which takes sides against atheism. In this way it has sadly become ingrained in us all to think of the Bible as a religious book. At this point religion further muddies the water by becoming an unexamined presupposition which serves to sidetrack debate away from the ideological question, the true heart of the Bible. This modern religious stance (adopted as always to avoid the issue) is, if anything, more perfidious than that of the priestly writer since for most people it is entirely impenetrable: a complication too far.

The fact is that most controversies connected with the Bible are about ideological struggle.

- In the first place, there is the upfront ideological struggle between the Hebrews and the centrarchal communities from which they had been marginalized. This struggle is only partly present in the biblical texts which, in exclusively propounding the Israelite view, deal with the subject in a very one-sided manner. However, it takes no great insight to see that this view was forged *against* the views of the centrarchal powers, most specifically those of Egypt and her Canaanite and Philistine vassals, and that it was this ideological struggle which caused the texts to be written.

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<sup>1072</sup> When a group such as the Hebrew marginals says ‘This is our god’ they are presenting their ideology up front. When an authority says ‘This is what the high god of gods has revealed to me’ they are hiding their ideology behind religion.

<sup>1073</sup> As opposed to the god of the proletariat, or the bourgeois god.

<sup>1074</sup> i.e. the god of the priestly aristocracy.

<sup>1075</sup> As I see it the prohibition of images is not comparable with the religious notions deliberately manufactured by the revisionist writers. Unlike them it justifies itself *materially* in the light of the phenomenon of superstition. For whereas the cosmic gods lend themselves to the idea of human control of the environment – through sacrifice and bribery rather than science and technology – the metacosmic god is by definition beyond such things and the prohibition of images is simply a reminder of that material fact.

- In the second place, ideological struggle is also present, actually within the texts themselves, as internal conflict between the various sources. This is not an upfront disagreement, as in the previous case, but rather a revisionist undermining of the ‘revolutionary’ Hebrew ideology by establishment elements within the later Israelite community. Such writers, most notably post-exilic priests, were not concerned actually to break with the Hebrew tradition. As I have previously pointed out their purpose was rather to render it compatible with their establishment views. To this effect they collected and preserved the Hebrew tradition in such a way as to carefully dampen down the painful exigencies of the ‘revolutionary’ god of the marginals by getting rid of him while at the same time trumpeting the transcendent and centrarchic characteristics of the metacosmic god in whose glory they, as his establishment servants, could then bathe.
- In the third place, ideological struggle is apparent in the difficulties people later experienced in dealing with these texts, as for example modern scholarship’s concerted refusal to engage with the god of the marginals – the ruling Hebrew idea.
- In the fourth place, and finally, ideological struggle consists of quarrels amongst people dealing with these texts, as for example my own argument with twentieth century Old and New Testament scholars.

It is difficult enough to keep an eye open to these different though connected ideological struggles in order to avoid getting them confused. But, as I have already pointed out, the situation is rendered even more bewildering by the fact that biblical scribes, like all writers in the ancient Near East, expressed their ideological views by the character and behaviour they attributed to their god and this appears to us to be a religious exercise – which of course it isn’t. All of this makes it only too easy for people nowadays, when studying the Bible, to lose sight of the all-important ideological<sup>1076</sup> question, and this plays into the hands of those who wish to present the struggle – whatever its specifics – as a purely religious conflict between the transcendent, metacosmic God and paganism. I for my part do not wish to be seen as denying the existence of this religious conflict. After all it is not as if I saw myself as allied with the god of the marginals *against* the metacosmic god, since as I see it they are one and the same. My argument is that this religious conflict certainly exists but only as a secondary phenomenon which my ideological opponents, both Christian and Atheist, choose to exaggerate so as to drown out the primary and political conflict involving the god-of-the-marginals idea which none of them want to deal with.

In our own day ideological struggle almost invariably involves an attempt to control language by imposing a particular vocabulary on the general debate. This being so it might be thought that I could most simply prove my case by drawing attention to the specifics of the Hebrews’ ‘revolutionary’ vocabulary and pointing out where either later biblical scribes or present day scholars abandon it. However, the fact is that

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<sup>1076</sup> I use this word ideological here to denote the way in which ruling political ideas colour peoples’ total perspectives. In doing so I do not wish to deny that the religious differences between a metacosmological and a cosmological understanding of existence are ideological for of course they are. However, for the purposes of this particular discussion the word ideological always denotes a political colouring, which means that the fight against ‘paganism’ as such is not seen as an ideological struggle.



though there are some interesting differences in the vocabulary used by various biblical writers it does not seem to be the case that these differences of themselves express differing ideological viewpoints. For unlike us these ancient writers were not in the habit of using words analytically as labels. Furthermore it has to be remembered that the ideological disagreements we are talking about here, both ancient and modern, are not the straightforward, upfront kind, as for example between Marxism and Capitalism or Yahwism and Baalism, but rather exercises in revisionism. This means that on the whole the struggle does not take the form of the development of a new vocabulary but of new slants being put on traditional words and ideas, often by the way in which they are patterned. So it is to these slants and patternings, rather than to changes in vocabulary, which we must now look as we examine the biblical material which deals with Israel's understanding of the strategic implications of her commitment to Yahweh.

### *Transcendent Metacosmic-God Patterns*

We will begin by looking at the two strategic patterns proposed by twentieth century scholarship for understanding the Bible.

#### *1. The 'sin/redemption' or 'paradise lost/paradise regained' pattern.*

As we have seen, the actual word which A. B. Davidson used at the turn of the last century to delineate the strategic notion within the Mosaic ideology was *redemption*.<sup>1077</sup> It is clear that what he had in the forefront of his mind was Israel's awareness that Yahweh had rescued the community in the exodus events – the salvation idea, which we will be dealing with below. However, it is also clear he had another controlling idea at the back of his mind – the notion of mankind's recovery, *by means of some kind of payment*, from the alienation from God which disobedience had brought about.<sup>1078</sup> I can find in Rowley's work on the doctrine of election no trace of this 'sin – redemption' pattern. However, it is taken up by G. Wright when dealing with the same subject. His argument for the presence of this pattern in the Biblical texts goes like this:

1. The plight of man is described in Gen 2-11 as a situation in which every progressive step in terms of the growth of civilization is accompanied by a degeneration of the spirit of man, caused by his refusal to accept the conditions of creation.<sup>1079</sup>

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<sup>1077</sup> See above p. 234.

<sup>1078</sup> Davidson, *Prophecy* p. 24.

<sup>1079</sup> 'Driven from Paradise because of his rebellion against his Creator, man faces a life of continual struggle against temptation on the one hand, and a recalcitrant nature on the other (Gen- 3-15-19). Civilization advances by successive stages, and man's progress in the civilized arts corresponds with the growth of his sin. ... The growth of civilization, therefore, is accompanied by a degeneration of the spirit of man, caused by the human refusal to accept the conditions of creation.' Wright, *Old*, pp. 52-3.

2. Abraham's election is presented as God's answer to this plight. God would use Israel for the redemption of the fallen world.<sup>1080</sup>

Though there is no clear agreement between biblical writers as to how exactly God was to use Israel for this redemption<sup>1081</sup> it did come to be understood in time that it was to be achieved through the purifying power of divine judgement.<sup>1082</sup>

Wright constructs the first stage of his argument on the following pairings:

- The invention of clothes and agriculture – Man's loss of innocence.
- The construction of cities – Cain's murder of his brother.
- The invention of music and metallurgy – Lamech's hardened vengefulness.
- The invention of alcoholic beverages – Noah's drunkenness.
- The creation of nations and languages – Human aspirations of grandeur.<sup>1083</sup>

His reasoning seems to be that the *technological progress* seen on the left hand side of these pairings<sup>1084</sup> is accompanied by the *spiritual regress* seen on the right,<sup>1085</sup> the implication being, I suppose, that in spite of technological progress civilization fails to achieve its goal because of a lack of spiritual acceptance of 'the conditions of creation' (whatever this vague term may mean). However, I seriously doubt that the object in telling these stories was to highlight such a pattern of thought, which seems to me to reflect not Israel's problems as a community of former marginals but rather our own anguish as an advanced technological civilization apparently going nowhere. Furthermore, given the total absence of the idea of progress and regress in the Old Testament I doubt that the Yahwist was even capable of formulating such a concept. But leaving such criticisms aside, if the identified problem was indeed, as Wright maintains, a spiritual regression in civilization and if punishment (Wright's purifying power of divine judgement) was the answer to it then why strike at Israel? Why not strike instead at the surrounding civilizations where the sin truly lay? The truth, of course, is that this 'sin/redemption' pattern is a Christian construct. As such it is not designed to provide a role for Israel. In the New Testament, where the pattern belongs, redemption is achieved in the proper O.T. way, not by punishment (which makes no

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<sup>1080</sup> '... following the Tower of Babel story we are immediately informed of the election of Abraham. Considering the coherent nature of the J presentation, it is impossible to assume that the two are unrelated. Indeed, the only logical assumption is that the election of Israel in some way must be the answer to the plight of man.' Wright, *Old*, p. 53.

<sup>1081</sup> 'Precisely how God was to use Israel for the re-creation of the fallen world is a question for which the Old Testament presents no unified answer. By no means all of the writers *see clearly* the universal aim of God or the mission of Israel for the saving of the nations.' Wright *Old*, p. 54. It is noteworthy that Wright does not appear to make any distinction between redemption and re-creation.

<sup>1082</sup> See quotation below.

<sup>1083</sup> 'The first clothes (Gen- 3-7, 21) and the cultivation of the soil are associated with the fall of man from his primeval state of innocence. In the present edition of the narrative Cain the agrarian murderer is associated with Cain the builder of the first city (Gen. 4.17). Progress in the arts of nomadism, metallurgy and music culminate in the completely hardened and vengeful Lamech (Gen. 4.18-24)- With the planting of vineyards we are presented with a picture of a good man drunk (Gen. 9.20 ff.). The growth and separation of nations and languages is associated with the story of the Tower of Babel, in which men are determined to make themselves a name by the building of a 'city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven' (Gen. 11.1-9).' Wright, *Old*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>1084</sup> Did the ancients see the development of different languages as a technological advance?

<sup>1085</sup> Did the ancients see loss of innocence as a spiritual regression?

real sense) but by substitution<sup>1086</sup> – Christ dies *in our place for our sins*. Because this ‘sin/redemption’ pattern is alien to the Old Testament, when Wright tries to impose it he encounters a serious difficulty: he cannot for obvious reasons make out that Israel substituted herself for others, accepting to be punished in their place. So he has to find an alternative scenario. What he comes up with is the extraordinary notion that Israel believed that in this particular instance redemption came not by way of substitution but by way of the purifying power of divine judgement. As I have previously pointed out, when interpreting the Genesis myths Christian scholars tend to have punishment on the brain. This would explain why such an idea might suggest itself to Wright.

A profound disharmony exists between the will of God and the existing social order. God in his redemptive work stands in judgment upon man for his sin, and the startling affirmation is made that man and his society can only be redeemed through the purifying fire of Divine judgment.<sup>1087</sup>

There is, of course, nothing in the least bit surprising in the idea that punishment can be used to correct behaviour. So in talking about ‘a startling affirmation’ Wright is presumably drawing attention to the fact that, though people in modern society have the rather strange idea that they can somehow pay for their misdeeds by accepting punishment,<sup>1088</sup> this is not the way in which punishment is normally viewed in the Bible. If this is the case then he is of course quite right. In the Bible punishment is *never* in itself seen as restoring a fouled-up relationship,<sup>1089</sup> nor are the words redeem (ga’al or padhah) or redeemer (goel) *ever* used to speak about the restoration of a relationship with God along the lines of the Christian ‘paradise regained’ pattern, which hadn’t at that time even been invented – or so I maintain.<sup>1090</sup> Technically the word redeem means to release by means of the payment of a price or ransom. As such it is often used in the Old Testament in legal or cultic texts. Outside of such contexts it is used of God simply to mean that he saves or delivers from oppression, captivity, sickness or death, by exerting his power:<sup>1091</sup>

‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement.’<sup>1092</sup>

<sup>1086</sup> In the OT the substitution generally involves a payment of some kind.

<sup>1087</sup> Wright, *Old*, p. 45.

<sup>1088</sup> I speak of this idea as being curious because society receives no compensation from the criminal for the destruction caused, which is what the term payment actually implies. The only benefit society reaps from the criminal’s punishment is the psychological state of closure: life can now go on. This is, of course, a crucial benefit without which society cannot function at all, as we will discuss below. For the moment suffice it to say that the Bible sees closure as achieved by forgiveness and not by punishment.

<sup>1089</sup> It is forgiveness which is seen as achieving this restoring effect.

<sup>1090</sup> The evidence suggests that this idea came from Zoroastrianism: ‘It may be useful to ask not whether ancient Iran offered to the West a conception of salvation in general but whether it said anything specific about an individual figure as saviour or redeemer. In this case one can see in Zoroastrian teachings, particularly in the Pahlavi literature, a fairly well developed doctrine of a saviour figure, Sasyant, ‘he who brings benefits’. Sasyant – who would be born of a virgin of the preserved seed of Zoroaster before the end of the world – would restore the state of living beings in the world and smite the demons, resurrect the dead, and mete out the final judgment, *thus bringing about the return of the primeval paradise and the condition of life as it existed at the beginning*. I know of no other single redeemer in Greek or Jewish literature prior to the New Testament for whom quite this list of claims is made.’ Willard G. Oxtoby, article on *Reflections on the idea of salvation* in *Man and his Salvation: Studies in memory of S. G. F. Brandon*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973) p. 23.

<sup>1091</sup> See Hastings dictionary of the Bible

<sup>1092</sup> Exodus 6.6. See also Deut 7.8, Is 50.2, Jer 15.21 and Hos 13.14.

It would seem therefore that there is nothing in the Old Testament which gives any credence to the idea that the Exodus was a redemptive experience *bringing a recovery of a proper relationship with Yahweh*. Furthermore, there is no indication that any Biblical writer saw the Exodus events as a reversal of the expulsion from Eden. In fact the Yahwist himself made quite plain what was in store for those who foolishly sought such a reversal, and it doesn't make for pleasant reading.<sup>1093</sup> For the Yahwist, central Palestine was no Eden. It is true he reported those wandering about in the wilderness as describing this hill country as a land flowing with milk and honey, as well they might. However, he also made it quite clear that to those used to the garden scenario of Mesopotamia or Egypt it looked more like a situation involving backbreaking toil and drudgery.

The truth is that though the concept of sin and punishment has an important place in the pattern of thought found in the prophetic writings, and a rather more restricted one in the pattern of thought found in the Genesis myths, *it has no place whatsoever in the pattern of thought found in the Exodus texts*. Consequently it is simply asking for trouble to try to understand the Old Testament by using this Christian 'sin – redemption' pattern. This point is well made by James Barr – even though he, rather confusingly for us, refers to the 'sin – redemption' pattern as 'salvation' religion.

Any religion in which 'salvation' [i.e. redemption AP] is central must give some kind of specification of that from which one is to be saved [redeemed]. It is notorious that in the Pentateuch this is not done; and the fact has long been a source of embarrassment to theologies which have tried to find in the early chapters of Genesis a doctrine of 'sin' or of 'original sin'. Gen. 3 clearly indicates a disturbance in the relation between God and man and specifies that man has done what God forbade; but the disturbance is not defined as 'sin', nor indeed is it described by any of the numerous terms later found in the Old Testament and glossed as 'rebellion', 'wickedness', etc. ... 'Sin' is not mentioned, nor is anything said about 'salvation' [redemption]; the so-called *protevangelium* of Gen. 3:15 is too vague for anything of this magnitude to be drawn from it. .... The other main account of increasing trouble and deterioration, found in Gen. 6, talks of the amount of 'evil' in the world, but offers no 'salvation' [redemption] from evil; for God decides to wipe out mankind, exempting only Noah and such others as did not partake in the prevailing evil. After the recovery of the world from the flood no attempt is made to express or conceptualise the ultimate evil from which one might need to have 'salvation' [redemption]. Terms like 'sin' do occur, but (as is notably the case in Gen. 4: 7) are not clearly attached to any universal framework; and while in the Levitical code of sacrifice, ostensibly given in the Mosaic stage of revelation at Sinai, offerings for the removal of 'sin' are provided for, the 'sin' in question is mainly a ritual uncleanness, and there is no question of a 'salvation' [redemption] from such 'sin' other than the sacrifice prescribed for it.<sup>1094</sup>

It is the case, of course, that the later prophets did eventually find a place in their thinking for redemption understood as an act of forgiveness:

Remember these things, O Jacob,  
and Israel, for you are my servant;  
I formed you, you are my servant;  
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.  
I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,

<sup>1093</sup> See the story of Lot's sojourn in Sodom, a second Eden. Gen 13.10.

<sup>1094</sup> James Barr, *An aspect of salvation in the Old Testament in Man and his salvation: studies in memory of S. G. F. Brandon*, edited by Eric J. Sharpe and John R. Hinnells. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973) p. 46.

and your sins like mist;  
Return to me for I have redeemed you.<sup>1095</sup>

This came about as a result of Cyrus' decision to allow the return of the exiles, which the prophets interpreted as Yahweh's restoration of a remnant of the community to their land, an action which was taken as a sign that Israel had now been forgiven. And it is also true that within these late prophetic texts we find the first expressions of the idea of a payment in a vicarious form; of the faithful servant who accepts to suffer on behalf of others<sup>1096</sup> – an idea which was taken up by later nationalist martyrs in their willingness to give their lives in the fight which, so they believed, would eventually lead to Israel's freedom from foreign domination.<sup>1097</sup> But this latter pattern is completely different from the one which we have been considering up till now. As 'prophetic redemption' it deals exclusively with *Israel's* restoration: with the forgiveness of her covenant-breaking and a second chance for her to carry out her task. The 'sin – redemption' pattern, which has been our subject matter, deals with quite another issue: with a supposed result of mankind's fall and therefore with the restoration of *mankind as a whole* to communion with God.

## 2. The 'salvation history' pattern

Having concluded that it is not appropriate to try to understand the strategic idea in the Old Testament by using the sin/redemption pattern, we now turn to the alternative way in which twentieth century scholarship presented it: as *Heilsgeschichte* or *salvation history*. Like redemption this pattern also begins with the idea of the fall and the loss of a relationship with God as a result of Man's sin. But, instead of imagining a rectification of this situation by means of a payment or substitution, here Yahweh is seen as turning the page and re-creating the world anew. This comes about by a process of revelation in which Yahweh discloses knowledge of himself to mankind.<sup>1098</sup> The full pattern looks like this:

Yahweh reveals himself as the gracious and transcendent metacosmic god in an historical act of liberation in which he is seen to operate unambiguously alone. By this act Israel is defined as the community chosen for Yahweh's purpose of spreading knowledge of himself throughout the world.

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<sup>1095</sup> Is. 44.21-22.

<sup>1096</sup> Is 53.

<sup>1097</sup> See N.T. Wright, *Victory* p. 465.

<sup>1098</sup> Speaking of the final editing of the Pentateuchal material S. H. Hooke writes: 'The first question that has to be answered by those who had taken in hand to give the material the form of the *Heilsgeschichte* was, How did it all begin? ... [In the first chapters of Genesis] God was shown bringing order out of chaos, making man in his own image, and placing him over the created order; in symbolic form man's relationship with God was shown to rest upon trust and obedience; then, still in symbols, the act of disobedience was shown, breaking the relationship, destroying the created order, and bringing sin into the world with all its disastrous consequences; the section ends [in the Babel story] with the breaking up of the original unity of mankind into discordant fragments, so that the very existence of the nations was the result of sin, and God had to begin again the work of bringing order out of chaos. How this work began was the next question which the final editors had to answer. ... the second stage of the story began with an act of obedience, an exodus from the chaos of nations ... The relationship based on obedience is re-established and God can begin the work of re-creation.' *Peakes*, p. 172.

Since this is a complicated structure made up of a number of component parts it will be best if we introduce and test each one of them individually before considering the pattern as a whole.

### 1. Yahweh reveals himself

H. H. Rowley: [Moses] came to men as the mouthpiece of God, announcing his word, declaring and interpreting the events of history, and finding in the interpreted event the revelation of the character of God.<sup>1099</sup>

There is nothing wrong in itself in using the idea of revelation in a history-centred pattern – which is what the ‘salvation history’ construct purports to be. That a god should make known his character through a revelation (as for example Baal in a storm) is unexceptional so long as it is not implied that something took place which couldn’t be explained in terms of the normal, cause-and-effect historical process.<sup>1100</sup> The trouble is that G.E. Wright goes out of his way to insist that in this particular pattern revelation is eschatological not historical. As such he describes it as arriving on the scene in the form of a mutation: as something which is completely unique, discontinuous, and extraordinary to everything surrounding it.

In what sense can the Old Testament be considered revelation? The Christian is one who has committed himself; accordingly, he does not stand on neutral ground. For him the unique, the discontinuous, the extraordinary nature of the Old Testament can only be explained as the dramatic, purposeful intervention of God, who here was inaugurating a special revelation of himself, one which culminated in Christ.<sup>1101</sup>

According to Wright this means that such a revelation cannot be adequately explained in the normal historical way, using terms such as growth and development.<sup>1102</sup> It seems clear to me that an eschatological revelation of this sort cannot rightfully have a place in what purports to be an historical pattern. By saying this I in no way wish to be seen as denying that the phenomenon which Wright calls ‘the Bible’ was something unique, discontinuous, and extraordinary for I firmly believe that it was. Indeed I defy anyone to come up with anything remotely parallel to its account of a marginal revolution in human history. What I am quarrelling with is Wright’s conclusion. Unlike him I am altogether persuaded that there is a perfectly good historical explanation for the appearance of this extraordinary one-off phenomenon. It seems to me that if Wright does not recognise the rather obvious point that the Bible, like everything else in this world of ours, *must* have an historical causation – whether we are capable of explaining what it is or not – it can only be because he is being wilfully blind. Having said that I

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<sup>1099</sup> Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 31. See also Wright ‘...in Israel the doctrine of election involved a view of a special and unique revelation of the nature and purpose of the true God, which was without parallel elsewhere.’ *Old* p. 74-5.

<sup>1100</sup> i.e. one which left traces of its passage in the space-time continuum, whether recoverable or not

<sup>1101</sup> Wright *Old* p. 73.

<sup>1102</sup> ‘As a device for understanding the Bible the idea of development lays emphasis inevitably upon the process of human discovery rather than on revelation, on gradual evolution rather than on mutation. ... Israel’s knowledge of her election by God ... is a primary datum in Old Testament theology, and it belongs to a realm of faith which cannot be described or understood by the criteria of growth.’ Wright pp. 11-14. See also pp. 28-9. ‘These ... distinctions which must be drawn between the God of Israel and the gods of the nations ... constitute the basis of the Israelite mutation which cannot be comprehended through the metaphor of growth. ... The religion of Israel suddenly appears in history, breaking radically with the mythopoetic approach to reality. How are we to explain it, except that it is a new creation?’

can appreciate his problem. It's clear that he cannot admit that the Bible has an historical explanation without at the same time admitting that it grew out of a political cause<sup>1103</sup> which I have labelled the god-of-the-marginals thesis. This, of course, he is absolutely determined not to do, for ideological reasons of his own. Like all of his civilisation predecessors (and indeed successors) he wants to avoid any suggestion that the Bible demands solidarity with marginals and a willingness to sacrifice privileges. His solution of the problem is to try and make out that the Bible has an eschatological genesis, by pretending that its truth was somehow parachuted here directly from heaven, even though he must know full well that such an explanation is increasingly hard to swallow these days.

## 2. The gracious transcendent metacosmic god

G. Ernest Wright: To the Israelites it was nothing short of miraculous that a great Divine Lord should so take pity on this people, should be so interested in an oppressed minority group, that he should engage in a fateful struggle with Pharaoh, the greatest temporal power of his day, and emerge the victor for their cause. These events were the conclusive proof, not only of God's power and might, but also of his gracious concern for Israel.<sup>1104</sup>

Scholars who employ the 'salvation history' pattern are keen to draw attention to the fact that the god of the Bible is described as all powerful. They argue that if he is portrayed as taking account of humanity it is only because of his extraordinary graciousness. Such a combination of *all powerfulness* and *graciousness* shows, unmistakably that the 'salvation history' model is designed to cradle the transcendent, metacosmic god. Proponents of this condescending god use the idea of graciousness to explain those passages in Deuteronomy where it is emphasised that Yahweh certainly did not choose Israel because of her strength or importance:<sup>1105</sup>

Here it is not taught that Israel was chosen because she was better than other nations. Rather was it the miracle of Divine grace that God chose her in her weakness and worthlessness, and lavished His love upon her.<sup>1106</sup>

I have to say that I find it quite grotesque to imply that if Yahweh chose to reveal himself to a weak nation it was just so as to draw attention to his own character of gracious condescension. It's not that I am unfamiliar with such behaviour. It is simply that I find it hard to stomach and impossible to honour in any shape or form. So if this is indeed the thinking expressed in Deuteronomy – and I am far from being persuaded that it is – we will be obliged to classify the text itself as revisionist. That this was indeed the thinking of the priestly writer and his revisionist friends goes without saying. That it was the thinking of the Yahwist in the Exodus texts is demonstrably false.

## 3. An historical act

G. Ernest Wright: No abstract words were needed to describe God's being; it was sufficient to identify him with a simple historical statement: he was the God who had brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.<sup>1107</sup>

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<sup>1103</sup> The only alternative idea, that it was a cultural phenomenon, is excluded by both of us.

<sup>1104</sup> Wright *Old* pp. 49.

<sup>1105</sup> e.g. Deut 7.6.

<sup>1106</sup> Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950) p. 18.

Once again the role of this historical idea in the salvation pattern is entirely dictated by the central notion of the transcendent, metacosmic god who, as opposed to the cosmic deities, is a god of history rather than a god of nature. Thus Wright:

... so confident were [the biblical writers] of the reliability of God's election promises that they looked to the future for their fulfilment. Creation and election, promise and fulfilment, were the means by which history was interpreted. Thus it came about that the Biblical sense of history was born. The contemporary polytheisms, having analysed the problem of life over against nature, had little sense of or concern with the significance of history. Nature with its changing seasons was cyclical, and human life, constantly integrating itself with nature by means of cultic activity and sympathetic magic, moved with nature in a cyclical manner. But Israel was little interested in nature, except as God used it together with his historical acts to reveal himself and to accomplish his purpose. Yahweh was the God of history, the living God unaffected by the cycles of nature, who had set himself to accomplish a definite purpose in time. Consequently, the religious literature of Israel was primarily concerned with the history of God's acts in and through his Chosen People.<sup>1108</sup>

However, as I have previously pointed out, this attempt to associate with *history* what to all intents and purposes is an *eschatological pattern*<sup>1109</sup> is mistaken and inevitably causes everything to come apart.

#### 4. Of liberation

G. Ernest Wright: Who was Yahweh? Nearly all of Israel's theological confessions were based on the formula repeated in varying forms: 'He is the God who brought us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'<sup>1110</sup>

As I have pointed out we are said to be dealing here with a god who is starting something new. The first step in this process consists of a great act of liberation which, according to the 'salvation history' pattern, reveals Yahweh's basic nature. While I have serious reservations about this whole revelation approach I have no quarrel with the idea of liberation itself, which certainly lies at the heart of the Exodus texts. That said, the particular liberation we are talking about is not our civilisation-freedom: the freedom which, as we ourselves nowadays see it, comes from living in a democratic society. That may be a much vaunted aspiration of present day western civilisation – especially in America – but it has no grounding whatsoever in the biblical texts.<sup>1111</sup> According to the biblical ideology liberation means something altogether different: *the right to fall foul of civilisation yet continue to live within it through the understanding and forgiveness of others – the right not to be marginalized.*

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<sup>1107</sup> Wright, *Old* pp. 20-1. See also Rowley: 'Through all her history [Israel] looked back to [the Exodus] as the supreme creative moment of her history.' *Doctrine* p. 37-8.

<sup>1108</sup> Wright, *Old* p. 71.

<sup>1109</sup> It is either an essentially eschatological pattern wrongly associated with history or an essentially historical pattern which wrongly includes eschatological elements. You can take your pick!

<sup>1110</sup> Wright, *Old* p. 49.

<sup>1111</sup> This statement may surprise even though it should be self evident.



## 5. Operating unambiguously alone

H. H. Rowley: None of the credit for [Israel's] deliverance is ascribed to her own activity, ... She was but the passive spectator of wonders that broke the power of Pharaoh and struck the fetters from her hands.<sup>1112</sup>

Like the idea of 'gracious condescension' the idea of 'acting alone' is also a signature tune of the transcendent, metacosmic god. I say this because in sharp contrast to *acting alone* the god of the marginals is characterised by the fact that he insists on working *in partnership with humans* and in establishing covenants with them which concretise *joint* responsibility. So if it can be conclusively shown that in these Exodus texts Yahweh operates quite independently, Israel being, as Rowley put it, merely a passive spectator, then there is nothing more to be said and I will concede defeat. However, before proceeding to the judgement let me make just one point: *acting alone* is not the same thing as *acting decisively*, for the decisiveness of an act does not of itself demonstrate a solo performance nor does the fact of going it alone of itself render an act decisive. I draw attention to this because, of course, everyone agrees that the Bible portrays Yahweh as acting decisively. What I wish to establish clearly before judgement takes place is that an act of a covenant god in performing his side of an agreement can be just as decisive as an act of a god operating entirely off his own bat. It may be argued that the latter type of action succeeds in drawing greater attention and glory to itself but that is an entirely different matter which I am happy to accept for, as I have already pointed out, I do not see the Yahwist's god as seeking attention or glorification.

When we actually study the Exodus texts it immediately becomes obvious that in spite of what Rowley says Yahweh is portrayed as eschewing *solo performances* and as only ever *acting in partnership*. The people of Israel groan under their bondage and cry out for help and Yahweh hears them and remembers his covenant with Abraham. However, he does not actually do anything about the situation until Moses takes action against the Egyptian oppressors. It is only then, and after Moses has taken flight, that Yahweh meets with him on mount Horeb. And what form does this responsive action of Yahweh take? A self-revelation of the partnership god in the symbolic form of a fire burning in a bush without consuming it.<sup>1113</sup> And what happens next? Yahweh urges Moses to take renewed action – though this time not alone but in consort with the Hebrew community – and when Moses prevaricates Yahweh makes it plain that if he wants results he has no option but to comply, since Yahweh himself is not a god who is prepared to go it alone. Could the partnership position have been put more clearly?

When it comes to the story of the plagues it is true that we modern readers see Yahweh as monopolising the action but this is only because we misunderstand the text. Due to our enlightenment mindset we take magic, whether we believe in it or not, as being a power completely foreign to us as human beings and to our normal manner of living. Because of this such a text, which declares that the source of the only truly effective magic<sup>1114</sup> is Yahweh himself, *has* to be read as a story in which Yahweh acts alone *since by our definition magic has nothing to do with us*. However, people in the ancient

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<sup>1112</sup> Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 37

<sup>1113</sup> See above p. 128.

<sup>1114</sup> I make no distinction between magic and miracle so either word would be appropriate.

Near East had a completely different understanding of magic and consequently would have read the text quite differently. For them political magic of the kind we are dealing with here<sup>1115</sup> was at its heart *a symbolic expression of ideological power*.<sup>1116</sup> In other words it was their way of communicating about ideological phenomena. Since, like us, they experienced all ideologies as manifestations of power and since, for them, magic was basically a symbolic expression of this power they took it as read that all of those involved in ideological disputes were capable of practicing ‘magic’, the only important question being how strong and effective a person’s ‘magic’ was.<sup>1117</sup> We read their stories of ideological struggle as accounts of competing magics but because of our enlightenment mindset all we see are conjuring tricks and superstition. In doing so we fail to understand that they would have taken the slurs which we direct against their magical beliefs as criticisms of their ideology which, of course, they aren’t! Our problem is that it completely blows our minds to try to think of magic as *symbolic* since the only thing which we all agree about these days (whether we believe in it or not) is that *magic is never symbolic*. For us, magic either exists as an alien power science cannot comprehend, or else it’s just eyewash and superstitious nonsense. However, what we have to understand is that the people of the ancient Near East would have been equally mystified by *both* of these propositions. Magic for them was obviously commonplace and no more alien to themselves or to their lives than are ideological manifestations to us and our lives. When you understand this it immediately becomes clear why one biblical source contends that the Egyptian wise men and sorcerers were just as capable of performing magic in the name of their gods as Moses and Aaron were in Yahweh’s name.

Clearly, therefore, these stories require us to imagine Moses and Aaron psyching themselves up to face the Egyptian authorities in an ideological confrontation the like of which the world had never previously seen. For no one would ever have heard of a bunch of social losers taking on the establishment of the leading civilisation of the day.

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<sup>1115</sup> As opposed to the individualistic magic of the wizard.

<sup>1116</sup> It may be suspected that in understanding magic in this way I am endeavouring to remove the superstitious/magical element from it. This is not the case. My objective is not to try and argue superstition/magic out of these stories but rather to argue ideology back into them. As I have previously said, when dealing with ancient texts it is always difficult to tell just how much superstition/ magic is involved. Mostly I suspect the answer is probably not a lot, especially where political matters were involved. I do not believe, for example, that people were in the habit of trying to improve their political arguments by punctuating them with magic or that the authorities were in the habit of deciding such cases by determining which side performed the most impressive tricks. In other words it seems to me that the magic in such texts is usually something which had been introduced in order to try and describe the ideological significance of what took place rather than being the result of a superstitious writer’s attempt to recount what had actually transpired.

<sup>1117</sup> For this distinction between ideological magic and the sort in the ancient world see Martin Buber: ‘...in the history of Mankind there are two differing kinds of magic to be found. By this I do not mean “white” or “black” magic; that is a distinction which does not touch the root of the matter. On the one hand there is a magic of spontaneity, where a person goes out to meet the chaotic element with his full collected being, and overpowers it by doing what is unforeseen and unforeseeable to himself, even though he may use transmitted utterances for the purpose and with sovereign freedom. On the other hand, there is the magic of formula; fixed formulas, fixed rhythms, fixed gestures are all prepared, and nothing more is necessary than their correct application.....’ Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: The East and West Library, Phaidon Press Ltd, 1946) pp. 22-23.

It was not unknown for skilled craftsmen working on the royal palaces and tombs to win pay rises and better working conditions for themselves through collective bargaining but such groups were well organised and had skills that were valued, giving them social status and clout. In comparison, the Hebrews had nothing but their numbers, which the Egyptians were anxious to control, or so the story says.

What the plague stories achieve by means of this symbolism of magic is to describe how it was that with the aid of this god-of-the-marginals ideology Moses and Aaron were able to win the argument in spite of all the difficulties. This of course, did not mean that they won the Hebrews their freedom for, as far as civilisation is concerned, winning the argument means comparatively little. When it comes to social conflicts it is the balance of power which counts, which was why on every occasion Pharaoh hardened his heart. But it is not *the effectiveness* of the strategy dictated by the god-of-the-marginals ideology which concerns us at the moment but *how the ideological struggle was conducted*, and here the evidence is unambiguous. The argument was clearly won – bringing about an unforgettable moment in which the civilisation authorities stood unmasked and shamed before the world – *as a result of a partnership between man and ideology; a partnership between the Hebrews and the god of the Hebrew marginals.*

But what about the climax of the story, when the fleeing Israelites find themselves caught between the rapidly advancing Egyptian cavalry and the blocking sea of reeds? Here, surely, in protecting them first with a smoke-screen, then by clearing a way of escape through the sea and, finally, by trapping and drowning the pursuing Egyptians, Yahweh is presented as acting quite alone?

And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still.'

The answer is that yes of course he is. But this is only because what we are presented with here is Yahweh fulfilling his obligation as Israel's partner – as a fellow covenant-signatory before the covenant was actually signed. When the Hebrews acted, in summoning up their courage and organising their perilous flight, they too were acting in a similar manner, independently – though they only did so of course because they were persuaded that Yahweh would do his bit when the time came. Now, at the critical moment when as a result of their courageous activities they faced extinction, it was right that they should expect their partner Yahweh to vindicate them. Of course the storyteller describes the Israelites as behaving far from confidently, and really rather badly, rendering them somewhat undeserving when Yahweh's salvation came. But this in no way alters the fact that, here too, Yahweh is portrayed as acting in accordance with his partnership spirit, and completely at variance with the supposed transcendent, metacosmic god, who naturally operates gloriously alone, or so we are told!

Happily I am not alone in recognising that there is something very wrong in focusing exclusively on Yahweh's act of deliverance when interpreting the Exodus texts. No less an authority than Walter Brueggemann explains that the reality which drives the tradition is not the salvation which Yahweh brings but rather the intrinsic hurtfulness of

the phenomenon of marginality.<sup>1118</sup> This being the case, Brueggemann claims that salvation is portrayed both as coming from the human side, by the way in which the hurt is embraced and voiced, and from the divine side by the way in which the hurt is heard by God and acted upon.

On the one hand, this community has *a bold voice for* hurt. It is prepared to take the risk and subvert the settled world because of its hurt. Israel will speak. On the other hand, this God has *an attentive ear for* hurt. Yahweh is now implicated irreversibly in Israel's hurt.

Bruce Birch instinctively recognises the danger in Brueggemann's espousal of this partnership pattern. He rushes in like some theological sheepdog to try and chivvy Brueggemann back into the God-acting-alone fold, insisting heavily on the supposedly revelatory nature of the Exodus event:

Walter Brueggemann ... is right ... that Israel's suffering is the crucial context for understanding the unique nature of this [Exodus] story. But even when Israel's hurt is noticed and voiced ... it would make no difference in its life or to the wider world apart from a God who responds to that hurt. ... It is in relation to Israel's hurt that we discover in this story something of who God is and that makes all the difference in understanding what God later does. What God does in delivering Israel finds its meaning as activity consistent with who God has revealed the divine self to be. It is the character of God as revealed in the Exodus story that provides the categories for understanding the exercise of divine power.<sup>1119</sup>

However, the fact of the matter is that Brueggemann is perfectly capable of returning to the God-acting-alone fold by himself ... or did he in fact ever truly leave it? For the god-of-the-marginals' partnership-principle to be actually viable it has to consist of a relationship between a group of marginals (the Hebrews) and their god (the god of the Hebrews) which is to say the deity who *by definition* represents their interests. Unfortunately, Brueggemann never quite brings himself to embrace this idea. As he sees it Yahweh is portrayed in the texts *as a god who exists independently of the Hebrews* and who only becomes these peoples' god when he hears their cry – which he does simply because he happens to be a god who is attentive by nature. What we see here is either a Brueggemann failing to break out of the fold of the transcendent deity to the god who acts in partnership with the marginals *because he is their true partner by definition* or a Brueggemann slipping back unobtrusively into the fold of the transcendent god who acts independently and in power, and who comes to the marginals first as *a stranger*:

When it first cried out in pain, Israel addressed no one and did not know its cry would be heard. Israel cried because it had to, but it knew of no one to address. The hurt of Israel, however, does not float in an unreceptive space. It is heard by none other than Yahweh, who becomes in the moment of hearing the God of Israel. This God, alone in the world of the gods, is like a magnet that attracts and draws hurt to God's own self. ... Yahweh is now implicated irreversibly in Israel's hurt. God is bonded to Israel around the quintessential human reality of hurt. The

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<sup>1118</sup> 'It is conventional in theological interpretation of the exodus to focus on God's powerful deliverance. In fact, the hurt of Israel is the driving reality of the exodus tradition. Notice what it requires and what it costs to identify the bonded situation of the empire as a situation of hurt. It is extraordinary that a conventional and routine condition of the empire becomes identified in Israel as a hurtful disorder. Such an identification requires that the imperial situation of 'normalcy' be re-perceived and re-described as abnormal and unacceptable. To acknowledge normalcy as hurt is a fundamental act of courage and of subversion, which in the moment of expression delegitimizes the claims of the empire and initiates the process of dismantling the empire.' Brueggemann, *Theology* pp. 46-7.

<sup>1119</sup> Birch *The Bible in Ethics* ed. John W. Rogerson, Mary Davies and M. Daniel Carroll (Sheffield: S.A.P. 1995) p. 122.

God of Israel will never again be unhurt or unaware of Israel's hurt. God takes the hurt of earth into God's own life and heaven is thereby transformed. The hurt, noticed and voiced, becomes the peculiar mode of linking earth to heaven, Israel to Yahweh. ... In obedience to Israel's cry of hurt, God acts, intervening not only to cherish the hurting ones, not only to stand in solidarity, but also to act in power against those who initiate, sponsor, and perpetuate the hurt. The voiced hurt of Israel is the material base from which the holy power of God is activated to transform, destabilize, and reorder the world.<sup>1120</sup>

Brueggemann is assuredly right in noting that the Exodus text highlights the fact that there is some doubt about the identity of this god who calls to Moses out of the burning bush. He is also perfectly justified in implying that this god responds to the Hebrew peoples' cry as a free agent with no obligations. However, he has no textual grounds whatsoever for arguing that Yahweh is not the god of the marginals but a stranger who happens to hear their cry and who only becomes their god when he responds to their need because he is by nature a god who 'like a magnet draws hurt to himself'.<sup>1121</sup> The fact is that the text insists that Yahweh *has* been the god of the Hebrew marginals all along even if his name is unfamiliar to them.

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, The God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ...I have seen the affliction of my people ... and I have come down to deliver them ..."<sup>1122</sup>

That is why he is seen by the Egyptians as being the god of the Hebrews.<sup>1123</sup> However, for the Yahwist, of course, this god is not simply what the Egyptians were able to see: the least and most insignificant amongst the cosmic gods, so insignificant indeed that he is almost not a god at all. He is, on the contrary, the metacosmic god of the marginals who must be measured quite otherwise than in terms of proactive power, of which the marginals have next to none. For the Yahwist, even the greatest of the cosmic gods is as nothing in comparison with this god of the marginals when it comes to the business of creativity. So if Yahweh comes to rescue Israel it is not because, as their god, he has an obligation to fulfil, nor even because as a tender-hearted soul he has been converted by their cry, but rather because as the god of the marginals he has a purpose for her. It is not, of course, that he has need of her strength or that he seeks to flatter himself by taking on such a miserable partner. It is not even because Israel's predicament has touched his heart or because, as a partnership god, he simply has to pick on someone and so ends up doing so arbitrarily. It is simply because in being powerless Israel has the advantage denied to everyone else in that *she is blessed with the eyes to see the mess civilisation has got itself into and with the motivation to do something about it*. It could therefore, I suppose, with some slight justification be said that the Exodus describes Yahweh as *choosing* Israel for his purpose even though the Yahwist never actually uses the fateful word. But no one is justified in saying that the Exodus describes Yahweh as some strange new god who

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<sup>1120</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology* pp. 46-7.

<sup>1121</sup> Brueggemann's suggestion that *in hearing and responding to this cry Yahweh undergoes a change whereby heaven is transformed* is sentimental nonsense which, though it may appeal to some today, would have been dismissed out of hand not only by the Yahwist himself but also by all the revisionist biblical writers as well. If his argument is that Yahweh's nature as a god vulnerable to peoples' cries of hurt has nothing to do with the fact that he is the god of the marginals then he is obliged to show how this understanding historically arises. Otherwise he will be guilty of accusing the Yahwist of inventing religious ideas and attributing the knowledge of them to private revelation.

<sup>1122</sup> Ex 3.6-7.

<sup>1123</sup> Ex 5.3; 7.16; 9.1, 13; 10.3.

operates unambiguously alone in suddenly selecting Israel out of the intrinsic goodness of his heart after hearing her cries. Such a god would have been from all points of view unimaginable in the ancient Near East. For linguistically all deities were *by definition* representations of natural or ideological powers experienced within the universe. Consequently if Brueggemann seeks to propose a completely new kind of religious god, one who as such would have defied all recognition, he is obliged to give a full account of how this strange entity came about, and of course he does no such thing leaving us all to speculate about revelations parachuted out of the sky.

## 6. The chosen community

Walter Zimmerli: When Yahweh is said to ‘choose,’ what is expressed is the free sovereignty of the Lord, who is answerable for his choice to nothing that he chooses.<sup>1124</sup>

The fact that Israel came to speak about herself as the chosen people is not something we have to establish. Indeed every biblical commentator has to come to terms with it in one way or another. The first thing to note is that within the ‘salvation history’ pattern election is presented as a sovereign choice, a fact which Zimmerli seeks to stress. This theme of sovereignty expressed in an act of choosing is, of course, yet one more signature of the transcendent, metacosmic god. The first problem this idea encounters is the fact that in the earliest texts Yahweh is never described as actually choosing Israel.<sup>1125</sup> This would seem to suggest that the sovereignty of Yahweh’s conduct, in so far as it exists at all in the Bible, was something which only came to be established over time as people, looking back, slowly began to see the Exodus events in this particular way.

The very nature of the case suggests that this formulation [using the verb elect] does not appear at the beginning in Israel’s theology, but comes to prevail when someone, looking at the vast possibilities open to Yahweh as creator of the world, reflects on the mystery of why Yahweh should concern himself in such a special way with Israel. It turns out, in fact, that, after several statements whose terminology is less precise, the theology of election first takes on its significance in the period of Deuteronomy, where it is developed with great emphasis.<sup>1126</sup>

But if the whole point of Yahweh’s act in delivering Israel was to reveal his nature, as advocates of the salvation-history pattern claim, how does this gradual process of recognition over the years make sense? How could something which was only understandable as the act of the transcendent, metacosmic god, operating alone and in power, be seen in any other way than as a sovereign act? What sense does it make therefore to claim that such an understanding only developed over time? How could something which was from the very beginning inexplicable in historical terms become better understood (though still inexplicable in historical terms) by later generations? I find this whole scenario completely baffling.<sup>1127</sup>

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<sup>1124</sup> Zimmerli, *Outline* p. 45.

<sup>1125</sup> i.e. in J and for example Amos (3.2)

<sup>1126</sup> Zimmerli, *Outline* p. 44.

<sup>1127</sup> Of course the actual process which took place was not the gradual recognition by later generations of the sovereignty of Yahweh’s act of liberation but rather the gradual masking of the god of the marginals by the introduction, by later generations, of the sovereign (solo performing) metacosmic god.

It has always been recognised that the other problem with the idea of election is its underlying rationale: Why did Yahweh select Israel of all people? In general, twentieth century scholars dealt with this matter in one of two ways. Either they avoided the difficulty by sticking firmly to the texts, contenting themselves with referring the reader to the few indications these offer. Or else they tried to answer the difficulties by resorting to speculation. G.E. Wright plumps for the former option:

Why did God choose Israel? If Israel's claim for herself had arisen late in her history as a result of a comparison with others, then we should expect a clear and consistent answer to this question. As it is, the later writers take the matter for granted and look upon it as the supreme manifestation of Divine grace. The Deuteronomist explains: 'Yahweh did not set his love on you, nor choose you because ye were more in number than any people-for ye were the fewest of all peoples-but because Yahweh loved you and because he would keep the oath which he swore unto your father's (Deut 7.7-8).<sup>1128</sup>

Walter Zimmerli follows much the same line. He maintains that Yahweh, as the transcendent, metacosmic god, had no need to justify his actions. However, he pursues the questioning a little bit further ... but the results turn out to be entirely negative:

Now since human choice as a rule implies previous reflection, it is reasonable to ask in the case of Yahweh what could have occasioned his election of Israel and no other nation. At this point, however, we find a striking reticence on the part of the Old Testament. The idea that Israel is especially precious ... is never brought forward. The introductory discourses of Deuteronomy go out of their way to make the contrary point. Israel is the 'least of all the nations.' (7:7) Yahweh drives out before Israel nations that are 'greater and more powerful.' (4:38) Later passages can go even further and speak of Israel's moral worthlessness and stubbornness (9:4-6; 10: 14-16). As a positive motivation for the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, in which the association between Yahweh and Israel becomes historically manifest, we find only one reason: a reference to Yahweh's love of the patriarchs and his faithfulness to his promise: (7:8). An irrational, free decision of love as early as the time of the patriarchs, which cannot be examined further, stands behind Yahweh's election.

Rowley, on the other hand, devotes considerable space to the argument for he simply cannot accept the conclusion Zimmerli comes to: that Yahweh's choice was arbitrary (an irrational, free decision of love).

No reason for the election of Abraham is offered. Yet the reader feels that though it is of God's grace that he chooses him it is not an arbitrary choice. At first sight there might seem to have been some arbitrariness in it, since it involved the descendants of Abraham. But ...<sup>1129</sup>

There is not enough space in this chapter to follow Rowley through his many arguments as he manfully tries to square the circle of this intractable problem. Suffice it to say that it leads him into the most extraordinary speculative endeavours:

... God ever chooses those who are best suited for His purpose. His purposes are many, and He chooses many to serve Him. His greatest purpose is to reveal Himself to men, and for that purpose Israel was chosen because Israel was most suited to it. This is not to say that He has not revealed Himself to men of other nations, or that He has not chosen other nations for other purposes. He has not withheld the revelation of Himself from man anywhere, but in varying measure, according to the capacity and willingness of men to receive it, has granted it. Yet through men of Israel did He give fuller revelation than through any other, not because they were initially better than others, or because they were His favourites, but because they were more suited to this purpose. In all the realms of cultural activity - in literature, in art, in science,

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<sup>1128</sup> Wright, *Old* p. 50. '... why did [God] choose Abraham? The only answer preserved in the early literature ... given five different times in the JE strata of Genesis. ...[is] that God's purpose [was] to use Israel for a universal blessing.' Wright, *Old* p. 51.

<sup>1129</sup> Rowley, *Doctrine* pp. 32-3

in philosophy - Greece far outclassed Israel. And these are not realms to be despised. We can legitimately recognize that all this is of God, and that for this purpose He chose Greece in a special measure, because she was suited to this purpose. The uniqueness of His choice of Israel was the uniqueness of the degree in which He purposed to reveal His character and His will through her, and for this she was supremely suited.<sup>1130</sup>

In this way, according to Rowley, we are supposed to accept that God chooses *Israel* to reveal his grace to the world, and *Greece* to reveal his culture ... and *Mesopotamia* no doubt to reveal his delight in gardening and food technology! This is all very entertaining but it cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called history and it certainly isn't an answer to the problem of election.

Another writer who has no fear of entering the arena of speculation is Dan Jacobson. After considering the usual ways of avoiding the issue he rightly, as I see it, comes to the conclusion that some explanation for Yahweh's seemingly arbitrary choice is necessary.<sup>1131</sup> He therefore proceeds to examine the matter more carefully:

... In some of the biographical narratives, there is a hint that the favoured of God might be those who are scorned and overlooked by others. ... A preference by Yahweh for the downtrodden is more than hinted at ... while in the codes of law ... the weakest members of society – the poor, the widow, and the sojourner .. are spoken about ... as being under his special guardianship. ... the prophets ... were more and more to insist programmatically that God's final election must fall upon the humiliated and outcast.

For Jacobson all these findings certainly clarify *the sort of people* Yahweh chose but it doesn't explain *why he had to choose* in the first place<sup>1132</sup> – why he was, as Jacobson himself sees it, such a choosing god. This causes him to resort to speculation, using the revelatory idea taken from the 'salvation history' pattern of the metacosmic god:

... What makes this God such an inveterate chooser? What is it about the act of choosing that reveals his nature? The answer I am going to suggest shows clearly that in the creation of our fantasies, and hence in the development of our moral lives, 'weaknesses' and 'strengths' are inextricably bound up with one another as are 'good' impulses and 'bad'. Yahweh comes into being as a choosing God because he is God of a people whose primal historical memory appears to be of enslavement and homelessness. ... Like the people, he is a wanderer, a God looking for a land – therefore he has to choose the land from outside of it, just as he had originally to choose or form the people itself. ... Out of the people's weakness had come his power including his power to choose; the wider the scope of that power was seen to be, the greater was the glory of those upon whom his choice had fallen. Yahweh had been free to choose Israel ... Israel had no choice but to be chosen.<sup>1133</sup>

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<sup>1130</sup> Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 39.

<sup>1131</sup> 'One might argue ... that Yahweh's actions are very much like life itself, which also 'chooses' with apparent capriciousness those people whom it blesses with gifts of any kind, and which invariably lets them know that they have been so chosen. ... Alternatively, it could be said that the Bible story has to begin somewhere, and with someone: why not with Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees? Both these arguments are persuasive enough ... but they are incompatible with the claims that the Scriptures themselves make on Yahweh's behalf... He is the sole and exclusive source of moral order acknowledged in the book. Yet ... no moral ... justification is proffered of the most fateful of the choices he makes.' Jacobson *The Story of Stories: The Chosen People of God* (London: Seekers and Warburg, 1982) pp. 50-1.

<sup>1132</sup> If indeed he did!

<sup>1133</sup> Jacobson, *Story* pp. 54-6. c.f. Simon. J. De Vries '... they had not grown up in or out of, their land; this had been promised to them as sojourners, and secured as their possession only through Yahweh's special intervention upon the scene of history. Thus in all respects they were a peculiar people, Yahweh's



If this human fantasising which Jacobson speaks of (in which weakness yearns for strength, the bad for the good, and the outcast for a chosen land) is indeed the only possible answer to the election conundrum then it seems to me that we can safely say *that there is no answer ... at least as far as the 'salvation history' pattern is concerned.*

## 7. The mission to spread knowledge of Yahweh throughout the world

Rowley: [Israel's] high calling to be the Chosen People was not the mark of the Divine indulgence or favouritism, but a summons to a task exacting and unceasing, and election and task were so closely bound together that she could not have the one without the other. Moreover, Israel's election was not merely for herself and God. It was not simply that she might reflect the will of God in all her own life and delight His heart by doing so. Here election was for service to the world. For she had a mission to the nations.<sup>1134</sup>

According to the 'salvation history' pattern the purpose of the activity of the transcendent, metacosmic god, as reported in the Bible, is salvation – meaning by this Yahweh's reordering of the chaos which resulted from sin by recreating the world anew through the revelation of his own character. Though the biblical evidence for a universal purpose in Israel's election is far from overwhelming<sup>1135</sup> it is difficult to see how a convincing pattern of any sort could be constructed without such an idea. The reasons for saying this are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the biblical story starts out in the Genesis myths with a universal perspective, which means that a universal perspective of some sort would seem to be warranted in its conclusion.<sup>1136</sup> Practically, given her alternative way of living, Israel could never have sustained much hope that the outside world would leave her alone. So in the long term the pressure would always be on her to come to an understanding in which she either saw herself as conquering the world or else as subverting it in some manner.<sup>1137</sup> That said, it is entirely understandable that with one empire after another taking over her territory and tightening down the screw, she would eventually come to have a much narrower

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special possession among the nations of mankind. This could never have come about except through his purposeful choice. Israel was a people created by Yahweh's elective love.' *The Achievement of Biblical Religion: A Prolegomenon to Old Testament Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America. 1983) p. 214.

<sup>1134</sup> Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 59-60.

<sup>1135</sup> '... it is an unexpected feature of the teaching of Deuteronomy in regard to Israel's election that, although it consciously considers Israel's position in relation to the nations, it does not develop from this any role or service that Israel is to play in regard to them. Yet in the earlier tradition of God's promise to Abraham there is an assertion that Abraham's descendants are to be a 'blessing' to the nations (Gen. 12.2).' Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978) pp. 94-5.

<sup>1136</sup> 'This [universal] interpretation of the meaning of these passages in Genesis is further buttressed by the setting of election in the total plan of history as conceived by the J document.' Wright, *Old* p. 52

<sup>1137</sup> 'The earliest model that we find for the interpretation of what Israel's election means for other nations is that of an imperial power bringing peace, prosperity and righteous government to those over which it ruled. For a brief period such a 'political' interpretation of the goal of Israel's election prevailed. Yet the realities of the actual historical situation after the division into two kingdoms made such a hope hollow and pretentious. We find, in consequence, that it re-appeared in a modified, and much more directly religious, form.... The picture is not that of a 'mission' in the strict sense of a going out to the nations, but rather that, when Israel returns to its homeland, it will bring the faithful of other nations in its train. Ronald E. Clements, *Fresh* pp. 95-6.

perspective, in which salvation would simply mean that a time would come when Yahweh would force the other nations to leave her alone. I find no good reason therefore to object to the idea that the Bible envisages a worldwide purpose for Israel, which could quite properly go under the label of salvation. However, as already indicated, I have serious reservations about the idea that this salvation was to come by way of Israel's faithful adoption of the eschatological revelations of the transcendent, metacosmic god.<sup>1138</sup>

The 'salvation history' pattern as a whole

In its studied advocacy of the transcendent, metacosmic god, as the one who establishes the biblical strategic idea, 'salvation history' presents itself as a thoroughly *proactive* and *religious* construct which is perhaps best described as a pattern of world mission. In this pattern, by revealing himself Yahweh conditionally offers his services to the Israelites who, in return, agree to adopt a thoroughly proactive and religious strategy: as his chosen people they will spread knowledge of what he has revealed himself to be throughout the world:

'That purpose [accepted by Israel in her election] is the conscious and eager leading of the nations to Israel's God that He may be their God. As T. W. Manson says.. "They are to conquer the world, not by force of arms, but by spiritual power; not to establish an earthly empire after the manner of Assyria and Babylon but to bring men under the sway of [Yahweh]; not to compel the unwilling submission of vassal states to themselves, but to attract individual men and women to voluntary acceptance of Israel's King as their King.'<sup>1139</sup>

The trouble in using such a pattern to understand historical Israel is that there is no evidence to suggest that she ever involved herself in such a missionary enterprise. This is backed up by the fact that Jesus himself, in fulfilling, as he thought, Israel's covenant obligations, never showed any interest in such a missionary endeavour either.<sup>1140</sup> In fact he is reported as specifically excluding such a strategy, at least as far as his own work was concerned. It wasn't until his death and the rise of the early Church that world mission was put on the agenda, which rather suggests that this 'salvation history' pattern, too, is a product of Christianity. This would explain all the defects we have identified above, in its component parts, and why it fits so badly with the historical Israelite community.

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<sup>1138</sup> 'What loving and serving God involved became clearer as He unfolded through the prophets the fuller revelation of His character. For if the first message of the election was that Israel was called to receive the revelation of God, it became increasingly clear that she was called to reflect the character of the God who was revealed to her.' Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 56

<sup>1139</sup> Rowley *Doctrine* p. 79

<sup>1140</sup> 'Our Lord addressed Himself exclusively to Jews and only once, so far as we know, did He go beyond the borders of His own country during His ministry. He declared that He was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and when He sent forth His disciples He commanded them to go only through the length and breadth of their land. This has led to the view, widely disseminated through the influence of Harnack, that while there is an implicit universalism in the Gospel, our Lord never gave expression to any explicit universalism, and that such words as the command of the Risen Christ in Matt. 28:19f. must therefore be quite unauthentic.' Rowley, *Doctrine* p. 143.

## Conclusions

Before examining the alternative pattern in which the metacosmic god of the marginals (and not the transcendent, metacosmic god) is seen as the initiator of the biblical strategic idea we should perhaps pause for a moment to consider the implications of the conclusions we have just drawn. What does it mean for Jesus and the early Church that these ‘redemption’ and ‘salvation history’ patterns turn out to be Christian constructs foreign to the Jewish Bible? If Jesus thought that his task was to organise a missionary endeavour or to act redemptively by paying the price for human sin, he would certainly have found himself at cross purposes with the traditions of his people. However, all the indications are that such thoughts never crossed his mind.<sup>1141</sup> As I have argued previously<sup>1142</sup> Jesus saw his task as that of galvanising the community into joining him in fulfilling Israel’s covenant obligations because the time was ripe for God to bring in his kingdom. This being the case he considered himself bound by the Mosaic covenant, *nothing being taken away or added to it*.

But what about the early Church? It certainly saw Jesus’ life and death as redemptive on a worldwide scale and it certainly instigated a worldwide mission as a consequence. Looking back at what Jesus had achieved, early Christians saw themselves as living in a new age. This being the case it is hardly surprising that they eventually came to the conclusion that the rules of the previous age no longer applied, allowing them to admit Gentiles into full fellowship without the obligation of taking on circumcision and Jewish food laws. There can, therefore, be no particular objection raised against the early Church’s declaration that Christ had died for the sins of the world<sup>1143</sup> or with its belief that in Christ God was creating all things anew<sup>1144</sup> so long as *these are understood as faith statements which implied nothing about either the meaning of the Jewish scripture or what Jesus himself had been up to*.<sup>1145</sup> So did Paul think he was giving an account of Jesus’ life when he wrote that ‘God through Christ reconciled us to himself’ or did he see himself as interpreting scripture when he wrote ‘as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive’? Probably not, I would suggest.<sup>1146</sup>

### *The God-of-the-Marginals pattern*

Having concluded that neither of the two transcendent, metacosmic-god patterns provide an adequate way of understanding the strategic idea in the Old Testament texts, we now turn to examine our own, god-of-the-marginals alternative. Briefly set out in our own post-enlightenment terms the pattern looks like this:

Yahweh as the Hebrews’ deity was by definition god of the marginals: the rationalisation of the interests of these losers whom civilisation had trashed.

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<sup>1141</sup> ‘What Jesus did and said stands out a mile from what early Christianity said about him and his execution, ...’ Wright, *Victory* p. 592.

<sup>1142</sup> See Chapter 3 above.

<sup>1143</sup> e.g. 1Cor 15.22. (c.f. Rom 5.14)

<sup>1144</sup> e.g. 2Cor 5.17-18.

<sup>1145</sup> ‘... early Christian atonement theology is only fully explicable as the post-Easter rethinking of Jesus’ essentially pre-Easter understanding.’ N.T. Wright, *Victory* p. 592.

<sup>1146</sup> Though both statements probably do imply that Paul saw the Genesis Garden of Eden myth as being about Man’s fall – which, as we have seen, is simply not the case.

As a consequence he was envisaged by the Hebrews themselves as the advocate of a reactive strategy of demonstration and exposure and therefore as relying solely on the power of the weak. He was pictured by them as demanding that they should stand up, cry out, and shame Egyptian civilisation by exposing the way in which they were being mistreated and, in return, as promising to defend them – which in the circumstances meant rescuing them and giving them a place of their own in which to live. In this way the Hebrews saw Yahweh as engaging them, the only group within society by force of circumstances aware of the reason for civilisation’s self-destructiveness, and disposed by self interest to do something about it, as partners in a worldwide<sup>1147</sup> salvation-exercise.

Most scholars recognise *salvation* as the key idea in the Bible to describe Yahweh’s strategy for dealing with Israel and, through Israel, with the world. But not everyone understands the word in the same way. In the previous patterns salvation (or its equivalent, redemption) is a *religious* concept which is taken as meaning the proactive intentions of a heroic and transcendent, metacosmic god who, acting alone, condescends to rescue a bunch of worthless slaves from their tormentors just so as to demonstrate his amazing grace to a benighted world, this being the first step in bringing it to its senses and back to himself. However, here, in this god-of-the-marginals pattern, salvation is understood in a totally different manner, as a description of the *political* intentions of the god of the marginals, who seeks to use the ‘strength’ of weakness to demonstrate the nature of true humanity, thus shaming the world into curbing its pre-consciousness, animal behaviour. In this pattern therefore, salvation is to be seen as the result

- of using the power of weakness as opposed to the power of strength.
- of exposing the truth as opposed to delivering it.
- of demonstrating the way as opposed to exporting (missionising) it.
- of working in partnership as opposed to solo performance.

as a consequence we find salvation manifesting itself in the form

- of a defence as opposed to an overcoming.
- of a rescue and flight as opposed to a victorious revolution.

It will immediately be noticed that unlike the transcendent, metacosmic-god patterns above, this pattern has no place for the idea of a privileging choice of one group of people over the rest.<sup>1148</sup> This will come as a relief to the many people who rightly find such a notion distasteful. It must, of course, be nonsense to suggest that the god of the marginals *chooses* the marginals in the sense of picking them out from the bunch. He is from the very beginning their god *by definition* (though not by obligation) which means that Yahweh was Israel’s god simply *because they were Hebrew Apiru*. This, of course, would explain why Yahweh is *never* described as choosing Israel in the

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<sup>1147</sup> It should be remembered that for the Hebrews the world was at most what we now call the ancient Near East.

<sup>1148</sup> The idea that Yahweh shows himself to be a god of privilege in privileging the unprivileged is ideologically sick. Jesus says that the unprivileged are privileged in seeing God and possessing the kingdom but he presents it as a fact and not as the result of God’s choosing to make himself available to them.

earlier texts.<sup>1149</sup> Exodus describes Yahweh as offering Israel a partnership in the business of world transformation and, as I have already said, I find nothing particularly wrong in speaking about this in terms of election. However, undoubtedly the term later became abused when the community ceased to see itself as a Hebrew entity and began to see itself as one of the competing nations in central Palestine. Indeed, it could be argued that the frequent use of elective terms in Psalms<sup>1150</sup> is a demonstration of how eagerly this relatively new word was used by the post exilic priestly authorities in their campaign to ditch the community's marginal connection.<sup>1151</sup> O.K., it was true that the Israelites at one time had had the misfortune of being foreign slaves in Egypt, making it appropriate that people now living in similar circumstances within the community should be treated with consideration. However, the idea that their forbears had been a bunch of dustbinned Hebrews was something that simply had to be suppressed, and marginals living within the community could expect short shrift from the governing, post-exilic priestly administrators.<sup>1152</sup>

*The pattern as an appropriate way of interpreting the biblical texts*

So much for the god-of-the-marginals pattern itself, but what of its adequacy as a way of understanding the Exodus tradition? For those familiar with the story it should not be necessary for me to demonstrate in detail just how much more appropriate this god-of-the-marginals approach is to the rival, transcendent, metacosmic-god patterns. People who have no particular ideological axe to grind will immediately recognise its superiority and to labour the point would be counterproductive. Furthermore, as something which intrinsically has to be seen to be appreciated, people who for ideological reasons of their own do not want to see it will not be convinced by having it rammed down their throats. That said, something needs to be said about the way in which the idea of salvation is used in the biblical texts.

Analysis using James Barr's work

To avoid any complaint that I discover in the Bible what I want to find, I will adopt my usual methodology of highlighting the findings of an independent modern scholar who has dealt with the subject, while closely scrutinising his presuppositions and conclusions for ideological misrepresentation. In his essay *An aspect of salvation in*

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<sup>1149</sup> Thus Ronald E. Clements: 'The theology of election ... with the assertion that Yahweh has 'chosen' (Hebrew *bāhar*) Israel, marks a very prominent feature of the teaching of the book of Deuteronomy. As such it cannot be clearly shown to have arisen in this form before the seventh century BC, when this particular vocabulary of "election" becomes current.' *Fresh* p. 88. I find election terminology used four times in Deuteronomy: 4.37; 7.6-7; 10.15 & 14.2.

<sup>1150</sup> Ps 33.12; 89.3,19; 105.6,43; 106.5; 132.13; 135.4.

<sup>1151</sup> It would be logical to argue that the use of elective vocabulary is itself a sign of revisionism, and part of me wants to do so. However, I find it difficult to talk emphatically about the Duteronomist or the writers of Isaiah as revisionists. They probably did have revisionist tendencies, and this use of elective vocabulary may be one of them. However, I have as yet been unable to identify any other obvious traces of these, whereas I have been able to identify in the Isaiah texts clear indications of the god-of-the-marginals ideology. I, therefore, for the moment withhold judgement. As for the priestly writers I am sure they were revisionists. That said, one always has to bear in mind that revisionism does not constitute a clear alternative ideology for it always contains important remnants of the ideology it seeks to revise.

<sup>1152</sup> e.g. Neh 13.23-29.

*the Old Testament*<sup>1153</sup> James Barr takes it as an assumption that all of the biblical material is essentially religious. The result of this prejudice is that no aspect of the god of the marginals strategy gets a mention since it is essentially political. This makes Barr's analysis particularly useful to me since it means that *his* findings will clearly not be influenced by any desire to discover what I am looking for.

Though Barr presupposes that all of the biblical texts are equally religious he is perfectly aware that there are significant differences between them. From the outset he declares that his concern is with *the type of religion* each text exhibits. One type particularly interests him. He calls it 'salvation' religion<sup>1154</sup> and tells us that it can be readily identified by the fact that it centres attention on the relationship between man and god and on the way in which this relationship is sometimes adversely affected, making it necessary for a 'saviour' to restore it.<sup>1155</sup> He assumes that this is the kind of religion to which New Testament Christianity, along with Gnosticism and Manichaeism, belongs. Clearly what we ourselves have labelled as the redemption and salvation history patterns would also have qualified as 'salvation' religions had they been vindicated by textual criticism, but of course in our estimation they weren't. Barr's objective is to see if he can uncover the roots of 'salvation' religion in the Old Testament, for if this can be done it should be possible to show how New Testament religion grew out of Old Testament religion.

### 1. Etymology

Barr begins by trying to find out what can be learnt from etymology. He acknowledges that it has been customary to hold that behind the Hebrew words associated with the root *y-s* – which figures in Scripture with a meaning 'to save' – lies the basic meaning 'width' and 'spaciousness'. However, he rejects this connection, with regard to his own research, as 'semantically insignificant', explaining that even though 'it remains true that the group of Hebrew terms related to salvation contain a number of associations with "enlargement", "spaciousness", etc, as opposed to "restriction", "narrowness" ... *one would not claim that these "spaciousness" terms constitute the central core of the salvation vocabulary*'.<sup>1156</sup> In other words Barr rejects the insight afforded by etymology simply because he can make no sense of the results in the light of the religious framework he himself has imposed.

### 2. Salvation in the Pentateuchal texts

Barr starts his textual analysis by noting that explicit salvation terminology is very unequally distributed in the Old Testament.<sup>1157</sup> He points out that in some parts (e.g.

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<sup>1153</sup> Barr, *Salvation* pp. 40-52.

<sup>1154</sup> The inverted commas indicate the *particular* way in which the word salvation is here used.

<sup>1155</sup> 'The question which I propose to discuss belongs to the field of the typology of religions. Within such a typology one might perhaps establish as one type of religion the religions within which salvation is central, in which therefore the structure of the religion is to a considerable extent built around concepts such as that of salvation or of a saviour.' Sharpe and Hinnells *Salvation* p.39.

<sup>1156</sup> Barr, *Salvation* p. 42. My italics.

<sup>1157</sup> Barr, *Salvation* p.40-1.

the Psalms) salvation terms appear very frequently, whereas in others (e.g. the Pentateuch) they are rare. He makes it clear, however, that the paucity of explicit salvation terminology in the Pentateuch should not be taken as indicating that the salvation theme itself is absent. He cites the well known absence of explicit covenant terminology in the prophetic material – which accompanies the omnipresence of the covenantal idea itself<sup>1158</sup> – and points out that in a like manner it has to be acknowledged that the salvation idea is everywhere in the Pentateuchal writings, even though explicit salvation terminology is not. He argues, however, that it cannot be maintained that the religion of the Pentateuch was of the ‘salvation’ type since mention is never made of any alteration in man’s relationship with God. He reinforces this point by arguing that ‘any religion in which “salvation” is central must give some kind of specification of that from which one is to be saved.’ He claims ‘it is notorious that in the Pentateuch this is not done’ and that ‘the fact has long been a source of embarrassment to theologies which have tried to find in the early chapters of Genesis a doctrine of “sin” or of “original sin”.’ So if the religion of the Pentateuch is not of the ‘salvation’ type, then of what type is it? Barr suggests, somewhat hesitantly, that it can be understood as a religion of law.<sup>1159</sup>

### 3. Salvation in the Former Prophets (Judges, Samuel and Kings)

In these works Barr finds typical salvation terminology associated with references to military success. However, he maintains that ‘it is possible to exaggerate the degree to which the terms ... are anchored in this military background’ and the concept of Israel’s victories over her oppressors. He believes that it would be wrong to think that ‘victory’ was the essential and characteristic information conveyed by the use of these salvation words. He concludes that ‘although in the historical books salvation terminology is quite frequently used in military applications, it is unlikely that this is the original setting from which the terms came to be extended to cover divine salvation of man in general.’ So ‘it remains doubtful whether the basic theme of salvation derives from that early military experience’.<sup>1160</sup> In other words Barr rejects the ‘salvation’ / ‘political liberation’ connection simply because, once again, it does not fit with his basic religious scheme.

### 4. Salvation in the poetic texts

Barr finds ‘the real locus of biblical salvation language,’ and ‘its application to the basic relations between God and man’, in the poetic tradition, by which he basically means the Psalms. His analysis shows that it is in these texts that ‘the statistical concentration of words meaning “salvation” is to be found’. He also finds that the framework within which this material is set is significantly different from that of the

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<sup>1158</sup> See R.E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM press, 1965)

<sup>1159</sup> ‘Basically, it would seem that the deliverances in the Pentateuch do not alter the relationship between the men saved and their God; on the contrary they confirm and re-establish the relationship already existing. ... In other words, though the Pentateuch contains a number of notable acts of deliverance, and though some of these in some later stages came to be regarded as prime examples of ‘salvation’, the inner structure of the Pentateuch is not particularly that of a religion of salvation; it can be read otherwise. In particular, it can be read as the document of a religion of law.’ Barr, *Salvation*. pp.45-6.

<sup>1160</sup> Barr, *Salvation* p.48.

Pentateuch or the succeeding historical books, the difference being stylistic. Barr claims that the *poetic* language used in Psalms ‘tends to do something that the *prose* texts do not do: it indicates what it is, other than mere concrete human enemies, that one must be saved *from*’ i.e. evil.<sup>1161</sup> He concludes that ‘though the Psalter comes no nearer than Genesis to defining the nature of “sin”, it nevertheless does much more to bring to expression what is the fundamental reality from which human beings as such have to find “salvation”.’

#### 5. Salvation in the prophetic texts

Though Barr finds the real locus of biblical salvation language in the poetic tradition he also finds the crucial idea of an alteration in man’s relation with God (the necessary prerequisite for a truly religious idea of salvation) already appearing in the prophetic writings.<sup>1162</sup> This appears first in God’s refusal to defend his people and second in his eventual forgiveness of them after years of suffering in exile. For this reason Barr claims that these writings are a sort of crossover genre in which something is drawn from both the poetic and prose traditions. He reminds us that salvation language appears very often in the prophetic texts, almost as often in fact as it does in the book of psalms. He points out that different prophets used these salvation terms in different ways. The pre-exilic prophets used them in their anti-salvation language which was aimed at discouraging their fellow countrymen from believing that God would this time let them off the hook. The later exilic and post-exilic prophets for their part used straightforward salvation language to encourage their fellow countrymen to believe that God had now forgiven them and was about to rescue them and destroy their enemies. Barr speaks of this change in terms of a developmental process in which something completely fresh was eventually created in the production of an eschatological hope of salvation.<sup>1163</sup> Furthermore he claims that this development itself paved the way for the future development of fully-fledged salvation religions in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>1164</sup>

#### Criticism

From our point of view Barr’s analysis highlights two things. First, his finding that there is no fully-fledged ‘salvation’ religion to be found in the Old Testament texts confirm how right we were in setting aside the notions of redemption and salvation history. Second, the enormous difficulty he encounters in trying to show that the ‘salvation’ religion of the New Testament somehow developed out of the salvation ideas in the Old Testament, far from justifying his religious assumptions only

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<sup>1161</sup> ‘The ‘enemies’ in the poetry are more than the physical military foes; they are associated with a whole range of powers and manifestations of evil, of lies, of sickness and death, of separation from God.’ Barr, *Salvation*. p. 49.

<sup>1162</sup> Barr, *Salvation*. p 50.

<sup>1163</sup> ‘The prophets had to struggle against the false hopes and assurances of divine help before they were able to announce their own assurance. ... In Deutero-Isaiah and some of the other contemporary prophetic fragments this hope for salvation on a national level, set against an international scene, is further elaborated into a theology of salvation, integrated with the cosmic dimension through the emphasis on creation.’ Barr, *Salvation*. p 50-1.

<sup>1164</sup> ‘The later heritage of such a position could naturally take its place within the longings for salvation so common in the Graeco-Roman world. Barr, *Salvation* p. 51



succeeds in casting grave doubt on them. In fact it seems to me that it would have been more honest had Barr concluded that from his findings *there was no real way in which one could argue that a 'salvation' religion of any kind could have developed naturally from Old Testament ideas*. Such a conclusion was out of the question, however, given his presuppositions. It would have demanded a complete review of the assumed religious nature of the Bible, not something he was prepared to embark upon.

To grasp the no-win situation Barr works himself into (so as to make it easier for us to extract ourselves from it) it will be necessary to concentrate, on the one hand, on his assumptions and, on the other, on the way in which these assumptions control his thinking. Barr works with four assumptions:

1. Salvation talk in both testaments is religious (not ideological).
2. A difference between two OT texts is a sign of differing religious (not political) ideas.
3. NT thinking is religious (not ideological) and witnesses to a 'salvation' type religion.
4. The NT shares this 'salvation' type of religion with Gnosticism and Manichaeism.

From his analysis Barr draws the following conclusions:

1. There is no fully-fledged 'salvation' religion to be found anywhere in the Old Testament.
2. As regards the Hebrew root *y-s'* the findings of etymology are to be ignored since they make no sense in religious terms.
3. As regards the Former Prophets the connection between salvation language and military success is to be rejected since it makes no sense in religious terms.
4. As regards the Psalms it is possible to detect a small step made in a religious direction. For salvation is defined as liberation from evil and evil *can* at least be thought of religiously rather than ideologically.
5. As regards the prophets it is possible to detect an even bigger step in a religious direction. For the prophets equate salvation with an eschatological hope and this gives every appearance of being a religious scenario.
6. QED: New Testament 'salvation' religion developed from OT thinking.

Setting things out in this manner makes it painfully evident not only that Barr's conclusions are driven uniquely by his religious assumptions but also just how hard he has to struggle to squeeze anything religious out of his findings, given the tight restrictions imposed by his analysis. When all is said and done Barr builds his connection between New Testament 'salvation' religion and Old Testament salvation ideas on the fragile basis of the Psalmist's use of the term evil and the prophets' connection of salvation with an eschatological hope. These meagre facts, so he believes, make it possible (though far from necessary I would have thought) to understand Old Testament thinking about salvation religiously. I am happy to admit, of course, that there is some ideological slippage apparent in the Psalmist's work, expressed, amongst other things, in a shift from ideological (god-of-the-marginals) to religious (transcendent, metacosmic-god) thinking. However, the idea that the prophets could be tarred with the same brush simply because they couched their

thinking in eschatological terms is entirely without warrant. There is no evidence that the prophets' understanding of Yahweh's forgiveness of Israel, made manifest in the return of the exiles, was seen as anything other than as an offer of a second chance for her to carry out the original task he had given her. In other words there is not the slightest sign here of any change in thinking. Salvation, for the majority of the prophets,<sup>1165</sup> meant precisely the same thing as it meant for the Yahwist: Israel in partnership with her God shaming the nations into changing their ways by demonstrating what living in radical solidarity meant; and *this is a political not a religious scenario*.

If we discard the religious presuppositions which are causing such bother and assume that salvation talk in the Old Testament is essentially political we immediately find Barr's analysis making much better sense. First, the etymology of the word *y-s*' becomes highly significant, for marginalisation is very aptly described as inhuman restriction and excruciating narrowness, and liberation from it as spiritual enlargement and spaciousness of living. Furthermore, a political understanding of the Hebrew root *y-s*' makes perfect sense of its paradoxical use in describing Yahweh as a shield, tower, or rock of salvation as Willard G. Oxtoby notes:

(In these expressions we find that) a root involving openness has, paradoxically, come to be used of fortifications and enclosures; but the fortifications make possible the ultimate ease and freedom of the defenders.<sup>1166</sup>

As regards the Pentateuchal texts Barr is perfectly correct to say that they specify no religious disturbance adversely affecting the relationship between God and man, from which people can then be saved along classical sin→fall→rescue lines *but why should they?* Barr only supposes that they might because he takes it as read that the Pentateuch is a religious text. However, had he come across these writings in the annals of some Canaanite king I cannot believe that he would have made such an assumption. He would naturally have presumed that they were essentially ideological, as I believe we should. This being the case it would never have crossed his mind to expect them to be concerned with the liberation of people from a *religious* fault or disturbance in their relationship with their god. He would have expected them to be concerned with peoples' liberation from a *political* disturbance like marginalisation (which is simply the word I have chosen for that civilisation-bred sin which made the Hebrews into the outcasts they were) and this, of course, is exactly what we find:

- Genesis 2-3 (The garden of Eden) deals with Israel's acknowledged peripheral position in the world. People normally described their own position as being at the centre of the universe. If Israel was happy to admit that she occupied a peripheral position it was because she saw Yahweh as 'saving' her from having to live in an ideologically dangerous environment where people constantly risked exposure to the marginalizing attitudes engendered therein. Israel, paradoxically, therefore saw herself as 'saved'

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<sup>1165</sup> I exclude, of course, the revisionist ones like Zechariah, Haggai etc.

<sup>1166</sup> Barr, *Salvation* p.19.

by being expelled from a place of ease and leisure and forced to live in much harsher, though ideologically healthier, conditions.<sup>1167</sup>

- Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel) deals with Israel's relationship with the marginals in her own midst. She sees herself as 'saved' from contracting a marginalizing attitude towards them by recognising *herself* in these people, and the people themselves as those whom Yahweh was concerned to save.
- Genesis 6-9 (The Flood) deals with the omnipresence of marginalizing attitudes in the world and explains Yahweh's tolerance of them as a contradiction he couldn't avoid. Humanity is 'saved' from just punishment ... simply because it cannot be otherwise.
- Genesis 11 (The Tower of Babel) deals with the impossible position Yahweh's tolerance puts Israel in. By rights he should destroy her enemies but for reasons of expediency he has chosen not to do so. So how is Israel to survive? The answer the text gives is that Yahweh will 'save' Israel by dividing her enemies and making it impossible for them to work effectively together.
- Genesis 12 (Abraham and Sarah in Egypt) deals with Israel's position vis-à-vis her arch ideological enemy Egypt. It sees her as being 'saved' not by her own devious stratagems but by Yahweh's ideological magic.
- Genesis 16 (Hagar and Ishmael) deals with Israel's position vis-à-vis the nomads which periodically threatened her new territory. It sees her as recognising Yahweh as 'saving' these people, even over-against herself, while recognising that they are incapable of carrying out a marginal 'revolution'.
- Genesis 18-19 (Abraham and Lot) deals with Israel's position vis-à-vis Moab and Ammon and sees her as recognising that Yahweh 'saves' them even though they get into difficulties as a result of making incorrect ideological choices.

So if there is no definition of religious sin in Genesis it would seem it is simply because it was not the subject which engaged the Hebrew writers' interest. They were on about something which they considered to be infinitely more important, which is to say the political sin of marginalisation: civilisation's habitual tendency to garbage human beings whose behaviour does not fit in with its scheme of things. If there is no definition of *this* phenomenon in Genesis it is presumably because civilisation had not yet invented a name to describe it – something which remains true even to this day, as my own attempts to find a label for it bear witness! But, in any case, for these Hebrew writers the nature of this unnamed civilisation-bred disease, which I define as a lack of human solidarity, the condemning of people like themselves to an appalling fate, was something altogether glaringly obvious. Since the Genesis texts were clearly written in

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<sup>1167</sup> It may be argued that it is far fetched for me to label the Hebrew's anti-marginalisation 'revolution' as a salvation movement, given that here in Genesis 3 it is described in terms of an expulsion but that is precisely what the Yahwist himself does when summing up his great central text (Exodus 1-14): Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in his servant Moses. (Ex 14.31)

a Hebrew context – by self-declared marginals for people like themselves<sup>1168</sup> – it stands to reason that the inclusion of a definition of a phenomenon which constituted the backdrop of their every waking moment and of all the judgements they made about everything, including these texts, would have seemed decidedly unnecessary. That said, though it is perfectly true that you cannot find a definition of the phenomenon of marginalisation in Genesis, the work positively reeks of it from start to finish, which makes it surprising that scholars continue ignoring it!

As regards the historical books of the Former Prophets it is perfectly understandable that the Hebrew root *y-s-ʿ* is frequently used in a political sense to mean a military victory<sup>1169</sup> of Israel over enemies. What we find here is the idea of *political* salvation, unveiled in the earlier Yahwist texts, carried smoothly through to dominate these later historical ideas; if Barr is blind to the fact it can only be as a result of some prejudice since there is no actual reasoning in his argument as far as I can find:

It is possible .. to exaggerate the degree to which terms of the root *y-s-ʿ* are truly anchored in this military background. It is true that the 'Judges' who acted as deliverers for Israel were ... in many cases, like Ehud or Gideon, military victors. It is also true that a military success for Israel could be called a *ysu'a*. ... But this does not mean that 'victory' was the essential and characteristic *information* conveyed by the use of this word. ... It is unlikely, therefore, that the military use, even in the case of holy wars or 'wars of the Lord', in spite of its clear occurrence at many points in prose narrative, formed in any way the source or point of origin from which the term spread into soteriology generally.<sup>1170</sup>

Though Barr is wrong if he believes that the Pentateuchal texts lack a clear understanding of the nature of sin, from the consequences of which the writers saw themselves and others as being saved,<sup>1171</sup> I believe he is perfectly justified in claiming that the psalmists, in choosing to think of salvation in terms of the overcoming of threats which menaced their relationship with God, did introduce a fundamentally new perspective. However, even in this there is still an underlying disagreement between us. For I see this change as a decision to dump the political salvation idea – along with the god-of-the-marginals – and to disguise the fact by expanding the existing notion of religious salvation. He, on the other hand, sees it as simply the addition of one religious idea to another: the notion of 'salvation' being added to the idea of religious law, maybe?

In order to determine which of us is right we will have to find out what was responsible for bringing about this change we both agree took place. Barr maintains that what we find in the Psalms is a religious understanding of salvation not found in any of the previous texts. However, he is careful to point out that this does not mean that it was a radically new idea. It is true that there is no way of seeing it as the

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<sup>1168</sup> They were presumably no longer actual marginals in the strict sense of the word since they were living as accepted members in their own precarious community.

<sup>1169</sup> It is important to understand that this word should be understood reactively and not proactively. As Barr himself rightly points out, these victories were essentially defensive: 'What we today might call a 'victory' would be a *ysu'a* only in so far as it was regarded as a relief, a rescue, a deliverance.' (Barr, *Salvation* p. 47). Such 'victories' were therefore signs that Yahweh was carrying out his side of the covenant agreement to defend his people, thus allowing the process of shaming by exposure to continue.

<sup>1170</sup> Barr, *Salvation* pp. 47-8.

<sup>1171</sup> It is not clear from what he writes that Barr does make this mistake since he never has anything to say about sin and salvation in a political context.

development of an idea already found in the previous literary works<sup>1172</sup> but Barr maintains that we can be certain that there had always been in Israel a pietistic current of thought which contained the germ of this religious salvation idea, even though no literary works have survived to prove the point. We can tell this was the case, so he believes, from an examination of personal names in the Bible, many of which are composed from salvation terms. In these the underlying idea is almost always religious not political salvation. I am happy to accept that this was the case. It seems to me self-evident that people who saw themselves as having been saved from marginalisation would also have looked to their god to save them from other sorts of affliction e.g. illness, death and the perfidy of neighbours.

Given that this ‘new’ religious understanding of salvation – which we all agree was associated with a pietistic strand running from the earliest of times in parallel with Israel’s historical current of thought – appears to be linked in the Bible with a dramatic change in literary style, it is natural to wonder, as Barr does, whether ‘salvation’ and poetry are somehow structurally connected. However, a moment’s reflection is enough to demonstrate that this is not so, for there are perfectly good examples of poetic expression in the Pentateuch (the song of Moses in Exodus 15 for instance) and in the historical writings (e.g. the song of Deborah in Judges 5) and these are as brim full of references to political salvation as they are devoid of references to religious salvation. So if the change is not due to the introduction of a new poetic style of writing what did cause it? Barr does not tell us. All he ventures to suggest is that the change manifested itself within the poetic/pietistic current of thought and that it constituted the root from which true ‘salvation’ religions were later to develop.

Barr may of course be right in saying that a change took place in religious thinking in Israel at this time which laid the foundations for future salvation religions like New Testament Christianity. However, that does not indicate what was the cause of the change itself and his attempt to identify what it was, by using the criterion of style, is manifestly trivialising. The real change was, of course, in ideology not in style. As we have already seen, what in fact occurred in Israel at this time was a concerted movement of priestly revisionism. Witness, for example, the reoccurrence of the revisionist idea of man having dominion over the creation:

What is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honour.  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet.<sup>1173</sup>

This means that the change brought about was effectively a regressive step – though that of course is a judgement based on a positive evaluation of the Hebrew ‘revolution’ itself. Barr obscures this relatively simple picture first by making the unwarranted

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<sup>1172</sup> ‘The religious ethos of the poetic literature is not *derived* from that of the prose, nor is the reverse the case; nor, again, do they represent temporally succeeding stages. The content of the prose literature belonged more fully to Israel’s peculiar experience and memory. But through much of the Old Testament period the two lay side by side in the total religious consciousness.’

<sup>1173</sup> Ps 8.4-6. see also Ps 72.8.

assumption that everything in the Bible has to be religious, and then by pretending that the currents of thought in the Old Testament were defined stylistically, a circumstance inherently unlikely which he fails to substantiate.

### Conclusions

So, in order to re-clarify the picture and establish the appropriateness of the god-of-the-marginals pattern for understanding the biblical salvation tradition, let me briefly describe the situation which is revealed by Barr's own analysis when these obvious faults are corrected:

- What we find in the Yahwistic texts (myths, legends, histories and poems combined) is the development of the notion of political salvation clearly constructed under the guiding influence of the god-of-the-marginals idea.
- What we find in the historical books of the Former Prophets is the continued use of the political salvation notion spelled out in the defensive victories of Israel's champions who were working in partnership with the god of the marginals.
- What we find in the prophetic texts is, once again, the continued use of this political salvation idea, spelled out first in terms of the ideological struggle against revisionist tendencies (covenant breaking) introduced into the community by the royal establishments, and then, after the exile, in terms of Israel's forgiveness and second chance.
- What we find in the Psalms as regards the idea of salvation is an individualist and pietistic mode of expression connected with an important ideological shift. Instead of political, god-of-the-marginals, salvation talk we find religious, transcendent, metacosmic-god, salvation-thinking. This, of course, is just one sign amongst many of the revisionism characteristic of P and his friends. Other signs are the notion of transcendence, of dominion over creation and the ostentatious labelling of Israel as the chosen people.

## Chapter 16

### The Hebrew Strategy And Personal Experience

Having established the viability of the god-of-the-marginals pattern as a means of making sense of the biblical texts it now remains for us to establish its viability in terms of our own experience. In defending their fundamental contention that the Bible is essentially about religion, not politics, most biblical scholars reject outright, or by implication, this idea that Yahweh was the personification of the Hebrew's interests – however these may be defined. Thus G. Ernest Wright:

There is something fixed and unchangeable about the God of Israel; he is an external point of reference. *He was no mere personification of group prejudice and ambition*; he is portrayed as in continual conflict with the people's desires.<sup>1174</sup> (my italics, and notice his pejorative conversion of the notion of interests into prejudices and ambitions)

I can certainly agree that there is something fixed and unchanging in the character of Yahweh, which means that he serves as a crucial reference point, and I quite accept that he stood in continual conflict with his people's desires since I am perfectly aware that he stands in conflict with my own very similar desires today. However, I am far from convinced that Yahweh's truth came to Israel by way of the revelation of something *external* to the universe, as Wright implies.<sup>1175</sup> If Yahweh had intended that humans should see him thus, as an eschatological point of reference, then he would surely have made himself *equally available to everyone* as an eschatological point of reference, which he clearly didn't. Advocates of the metacosmic god have always found this a massive stumbling block. They have tried to find ways around it, of course, by arguing that God was always there for men and women *to discover* if they so desired but that is no answer to the problem, as they must know. For there is *no sense* in a point of reference which is not *readily* visible to everyone and there is *no justice* in a point of reference which is made readily available *only to certain individuals*. So from a theoretical point of view the idea of Yahweh as an external, eschatological point of reference is an unjustifiable bit of nonsense, as atheists have always rightly maintained, and there really are no two ways about it. Since we live and move and have our being in an altogether material world the only viable point of reference for us is a material one equally available to every human being without distinction – *which, of course, is precisely what the god of the marginals provides.*<sup>1176</sup>

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<sup>1174</sup> Wright, *Old* p. 48.

<sup>1175</sup> 'In Israel, therefore, the social order was not grounded in nature, nor was the law a natural law. Law and society were brought into being through a special revelation of God in the setting of the covenant.' Wright, *Old* p. 59

<sup>1176</sup> I use the word material not in the strictly philosophical sense in which what is material is contrasted with what is merely an idea (i.e. idealistic). I use the word material to characterise *all* that pertains to the cosmos – including ideas – and which as a result can be scientifically examined and verified, at least in principle. Consequently, in my usage the material is contrasted with the eschatological (the spiritual?), with that which is understood as being 'exterior' or 'prior' to the universe.

Because the awareness I have named the god of the marginals comes to us as a material revelation it does not, nor indeed could it logically, bring us to a realisation of how we stand to some supposed creator of the universe. Rather it brings us to a political awareness of how we stand in relation to other beings (human and otherwise) and they to us. The essential political consciousness in coming to know the other as a thou – which arises in all of us in our earliest childhood – quite inevitably, of itself, brings about the self-revelation of the god of the marginals. For since it is the case that our species, unlike all others, has passed the threshold of consciousness there naturally comes a moment in our personal development when we become aware of the phenomenon of marginalisation. For example, we are playing with a group of friends when for some reason one of them refuses to continue with the game, thereby spoiling the fun. This presents us with the choice of abandoning either the game or our recalcitrant playmate. In that moment we become startlingly conscious how strongly self-interest dictates that we defend the game (and our fun) by sacrificing the wretched kill-joy. However, at the same time we can't help but be aware of the fact that nothing can justify such an action. *At that moment of recognition when we admit, if only for an unguarded instant, that none of us has the right to treat a fellow human being – another 'self' – as if they counted for nothing, the god of the marginals stands effectively revealed.* It is important to understand that what we are here describing is a 'material awareness' which *all of us*, as members of the human race, encounter. Such a revelation, therefore, is an altogether different phenomenon from the kind of revelation which biblical scholars enjoy talking about viz. an *eschatological* gift of enlightenment ostensibly offered by the metacosmic god to a selected few, which only then may be *materially* handed on in a secondary manner to all and sundry.<sup>1177</sup>

But if it is the case that the god of the marginals is revealed in a material fashion to everyone without discrimination, making such occurrences commonplace, what is the point in talking in revelatory terms about the crucial historical events recounted in the Exodus texts? Well, the fact is that historical events are usually said to be revealing not because they succeed in making a few gifted people aware of eschatological truths<sup>1178</sup> never before experienced but rather because they force everyone to recognise all too obvious material truths that have all too often been ignored. Such revelations are therefore experienced as *crushing reminders* not as *new disclosures*. It seems to me that this is precisely how all biblical revelations, including the Exodus events, characteristically function. What we find in this Exodus tradition is clearly a description of the beginnings of a 'revolution' in which, possibly for the first time in human history, marginals began organising so as to be in a position to stand up for themselves against civilisation's prejudices. As such it constitutes in itself the description of *an historical revelation*, which means that it is perfectly appropriate for us to use revelatory language in describing it *just so long as we don't lose sight of the*

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<sup>1177</sup> It seems to me that this later construct (which we have already identified as shameful nonsense) is nothing more than a contrivance fabricated by establishment clerics in order to hide the awful material truth which the god of the marginals reveals and which none of us, apart from the marginals, wants to know about.

<sup>1178</sup> Such as the unveiling of the character of a new god who unexpectedly breaks into your life to perform special and unique acts which are completely discontinuous and extraordinary to everything which has gone before, as per Wright, see above p. 251-2.



*fact that it is a material revelation we are talking about, perceivable as such by everyone who was involved as well as by later students of history like ourselves.*<sup>1179</sup>

Given that the god of the marginals reveals himself historically in the marginal ‘revolution’ as well as experientially to all of us in our maturing consciousness,<sup>1180</sup> what is our response to this revelation, generally speaking? Well, all of us civilisation-folk know the score. Whenever he turns up in our lives, pricking our consciences, we experience the god of the marginals as a threat to our civilisation games (I am talking now of our serious, adult games where, however, the fundamental principles of our childhood games still apply). It’s not that he rejects our civilisation and forbids us to play its games. What we find in our unguarded moment of consciousness is rather his condemnation of our dismissive treatment of those who inconvenience our play. In fact, if the truth were told it would be much easier for us to accept a complete ban on some of our treasured civilisation games<sup>1181</sup> than what the arrival of consciousness actually demands of us: solidarity with the wretched misfits who screw up our efforts to build a better and more enjoyable world. So, needless to say, when moments of decision arise most of us, most of the time, turn a blind eye to this god of the marginals as we sacrifice the no-users who mess up our serious fun. In saying this I am, of course, giving away no secrets for there is nothing here of which any of us is the least bit ignorant. However, this collective and wilful blindness we all indulge in constitutes the least significant part of our behaviour. Much more important is the fact that as civilization folk we then go on collectively to make out that dustbinning such no users, this human trash, is in fact *the right and proper thing to do*. ‘They are wicked and disgusting people’, we tell each other. ‘Not only do they fail to make a contribution to society but they actually make a shitting mess of the contributions others make. Whatever happens to them it’s their own fault (besides which they are dirty, have no manners and smell).’

Fortunately, this is not the whole story for there is another part of ourselves which is horrified by our propensity to dustbin those who obstruct our civilisation games. This part of us is acutely aware of the danger of trashing people indiscriminately. In this state of mind we remember that it is all too easy to make wrong judgements (judge not that you be not judged) and to condemn individuals for defects which are the consequences of developments over which they have had little or no control (There but for the grace of God go I). Following this line of thinking we easily find ourselves excusing everyone for their bad behaviour, whatever it is and whoever they happen to be, by putting their conduct down to such things as poverty, lack of a proper upbringing or genetic disorder. The problem we face in taking this liberal stance (as conservatives never fail to remind us) is that by attributing a lack of responsibility to wrongdoers we rob them of the power of living creatively as well. Effectively, in saving such people from stricture we also condemn them to a less than human existence.

It is important to realise that these conflicting attitudes, which justify a trashing of wrongdoers on the one hand and their exoneration on the other, exist not just as a sort

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<sup>1179</sup> The details of the history of this ‘revolution’, where and when it took place, are not necessarily important. That it took place sometime somewhere and what was its basic character is all that matters.

<sup>1180</sup> Whether or not we choose to clothe the revelation itself in a mythic form by naming it thus.

<sup>1181</sup> e.g. the lending of money with usury.

of communal schizophrenia in which hard-line conservatives are forever pitted against woolly liberals. The truth is that, though we may strenuously seek to deny the fact, it is also very often a personal schizophrenia which divides us from ourselves. And it has to be emphasised that this is by no means a Jekyll and Hyde situation in which our good self discovers that it is somehow tragically bound together with its evil counterpart. For our awareness is that, while both positions are somehow flawed, both nonetheless contain an important element of truth lacking in the other. It is, of course, for this reason that we find Christians and atheists, speaking from both stances, justifying them with or without biblical authority. Our trouble is that, though we secretly know that these positions are not only contradictory but essentially flawed, there does not seem to be an obvious way of squaring the circle. Consequently we tend vaguely to sketch out a very general personal understanding before hurrying on to some other matter – which is precisely what I have no intention of doing ... until I can satisfactorily work out what the true biblical attitude is.

Though, like everyone else, Christians tend to divide into one or other of these liberal or conservative camps the truth is that despite all the quotations offered in their defence there is nothing in the least bit biblical about either of them. The conservative stance is, of course, an unqualified civilisation-position in which those who refuse to contribute to the collective cause are simply written off when it becomes clear that they are not prepared to repent and make amends (restitution). The liberal stance on the other hand, is a somewhat moderated civilisation-position in which more attention is paid to a careful examination of every case before proceeding to the trashing exercise. For though it is true that liberals are *accused* by conservatives of exonerating *everyone*, and therefore of wrong-headedly justifying the wicked, this is in fact not the logic of their position which is rather that criminals can only be pronounced wicked and trashed when their responsibility for their actions has been satisfactorily proved beyond all reasonable doubt. At the end of the day, therefore, there is nothing preventing a general consensus emerging in favour of the trashing of ‘genuinely wicked people’ ... apart from that vague scruple we all still have, in some forgotten corner of our minds, against the trashing of human beings *per se* – the god of the marginals exigency.

Christians tend to understand Jesus’ dictum about not judging other people<sup>1182</sup> as meaning that we should not pass sentence on them because, lacking the evidence in full, we are not in a proper position to do so without risking injustice. But this is most unlikely to have been what he was driving at. A god-of-the-marginals reading of this text indicates that what he really meant by ‘judging’ was not the business of coming to a considered opinion about peoples’ responsibility for their actions (which is, after all, typically a *civilisation* preoccupation) but rather the business of marginalizing people by the simple fact of condemning them as wicked. In other words what Jesus meant in saying ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ was ‘Never trash people, for by venturing into the trashing business you will inevitably be trashing yourself in God’s sight’ – God being the god of the marginals, of course.

In this regard it seems to me appropriate to return to a matter we mentioned earlier: our modern belief that people can pay for their misdeeds by accepting their punishment. I

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<sup>1182</sup> Mt 7.1. Lk 6.37 cf. Jn. 8.15b.

have already pointed out that whatever you wish to do with this idea (and some scholars clearly want to run with it) you simply cannot claim that it is biblical, for in the Bible punishment is *never* seen as *making up for* a wrongdoing. According to the biblical writers the only act which achieves the restoration of a relationship broken by wrongdoing is either restitution offered by the criminal or else forgiveness offered by the injured party. This does not mean that the Hebrews set aside judicial retribution (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth). What it indicates is that they understood that, unlike restitution and forgiveness, retribution is simply a convenient arrangement which allows society to achieve closure on a criminal act without pretending in any way to mend the relationship it damaged. This modern notion of punishment as the payment of a debt (i.e. as a act of restitution) demonstrates just how anxious all of us still are to avoid the unpalatable business of having to forgive and be forgiven. For when you examine the idea closely you discover that it is simply a conspiratorial device whereby on the one hand civilisation pretends to deal with the damage caused by a crime without having to forgive the criminal, and, on the other, wrongdoers pretend to make amends for what they have done without having to admit that their restoration is entirely due to the forgiveness of others. It seems to me that the selfsame strategy of avoidance is at work in the case of our own attitude to Jesus' saying 'Judge not that you be not judged'. Here the object of the exercise is for us civilisation folk to avoid seeing that consciousness prohibits the trashing of *any and all* human beings, not only those judged by us to be fully responsible for their acts.

What we are presented with here is a pattern of contradiction in which all of us civilisation-folk *systematically* turn a blind eye to the exigencies of our consciences while carefully hiding what we are doing from ourselves and each other. We have already seen how we habitually refuse to accept the crying need for solidarity and mercy, covering up the fact by pontificating on and on about justice and righteousness. Here, now, we find ourselves in a like manner refusing to accept the crying need for forgiveness and disguising our perfidy with a load of old rubbish about criminals paying their debts by accepting their punishment. Who can possibly save us all from such obdurate and wilful blindness? The obvious answer which the biblical tradition provides is that only the marginals are in a position to do the job, for though we civilization-folk perceive the god of the marginals as a threat, they, as sacrificed misfits, find liberation in his revelations. In other words, whereas we naturally seek to deny the god of the marginals they as naturally welcome him with open arms.

I am very conscious that in presenting the marginals as the only section of society capable of truly perceiving this pattern of contradiction for what it is,<sup>1183</sup> and so of rescuing civilisation folk from themselves, the biblical tradition<sup>1184</sup> makes a claim which requires a great deal of justification. It is, after all, one thing to claim that no one has the right to trash another fellow human being and quite another to claim that only by embracing the marginal viewpoint can we see clearly enough to make the right choices in our ever more powerful and far-reaching civilisation-games. Given time and serious soul-searching we may, I suppose, one day, just about find in ourselves enough mercy not to give way to our natural desire to trash the wretched people who hamper

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<sup>1183</sup> Whereby we all turn a blind eye to the exigencies of our consciences.

<sup>1184</sup> i.e. the tradition designated by the Yahwist, the classical prophets and Jesus.

our enjoyment and creativity, but is there any hope that we will ever be big enough to admit that when it comes to making decisions about how to impose our collective will on our environment their viewpoint is radically better than ours; making it necessary for us to actually move our feet to join them? What, after all, makes the position of these miserable no-users so special? Many sections of society are oppressed with much less cause, so what is it about social outcasts which makes their perspective so crucial?

To answer this question it will be necessary first to establish an overview of the way in which oppression functions in human society. It is important to remind ourselves that the phenomenon must have existed in human society long before civilisation arose and that, while it is possibly true to say that in certain instances civilisation structured and exaggerated the existing oppression, it was certainly not responsible for creating it in the first place. Indeed it would seem that the roots of all forms of oppression are to be found in our genes: as part of our natural animal inheritance. Bearing this in mind I would suggest that there are, generally speaking, two categories of oppression. First, there are the kinds which civilisation frowns upon and does its best to eradicate and second, there are the kinds which, on the contrary, civilisation actively fosters.

In the first category we have, for example, the sort of oppressions which spring from our basic animal recognition that certain things (e.g. food or mates) are valuable and to be prized. Such a recognition tends to induce us to behave oppressively by coveting and stealing. Then, again, there are other kinds of oppression, resulting from the natural competitiveness which exists amongst animals, like ourselves, which operate in groups. Such competitive instincts tend to lead us to behave oppressively, so as to frustrate competitors, even to the extent of killing them occasionally (e.g.: Abel). Then, again, there are the kinds of oppression normally classified as bullying, in which we gain pleasure by repeatedly picking on weaker members in the group and humiliating them.<sup>1185</sup>

Because all of these forms of oppression disrupt social harmony and hinder cooperation, we find ancient civilizations quite understandably legislating against them. There are, however, a number of forms of oppression which, it seems, civilisations, both ancient and modern, approved of. For example, we find them legislating arbitrarily to limit the freedom of foreigners, women and children, and people generally designated as members of the lower orders. As with the first category it would seem that these forms of oppression were not invented but rather based on natural instincts already occurring within humans.<sup>1186</sup> However, instead of attempting to control such instincts by legislating against the prejudicial behaviour they gave rise to, we find civilisations actively structuring prejudicial behaviour of this kind within the culture.

Why did this happen? As I understand it, in making it possible to amass power and wealth, settlement and civilization had the effect of greatly increasing competition in

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<sup>1185</sup> 'A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.' Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. (Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) p. 9.

<sup>1186</sup> As a result of the workings of pure genetics we find something very like patriarchy and xenophobia in chimpanzee society as well as the downgrading of homosexuals and the offspring of lower ranking individuals.

human society and this was something which the leaders of the community found it difficult to live with. Even modern day capitalists are sometimes made to feel uncomfortable living with unbridled competition. When they find themselves excluded from certain economic activities they naturally feel aggrieved and demand the right of ‘a level playing field’. However, once they have a foot in the door they just as naturally seek to protect the investment they have made by stifling further competition.<sup>1187</sup> This explains why anti-competitive structures in the form of trusts, monopolies and cartels appeared throughout the capitalist world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and why it became necessary to outlaw such developments in order to restore free competition.<sup>1188</sup> It would seem to be the case that, in a very similar manner, the leaders in early human communities came to recognize that what I have called structures of oppression could be used to limit this steep rise in competition in their communities by preventing large numbers of people from participating fully in the collective decision-making. In other words these so-called structures of oppression were in truth structures of *suppression*: structures designed to limit competition.

It seems likely that the first group of people to be singled out for such treatment would have been stray foreigners who often, as a consequence, ended up as slaves.<sup>1189</sup> In pre-sedentary society a human community would have consisted, by and large, of an extended family numbering anything from fifty to a hundred and fifty individuals moving about together while following their food resources. In such a world isolated individuals would have been in a vulnerable position. Consequently, the pressure would have been on them to seek inclusion in one of these larger communities. However, given the instinctive human fear of foreigners – a characteristic we share with other group-dwelling primates like chimpanzees – inclusion would not have been easy to achieve unless the isolated foreigners had highly valued commodities or skills to offer in exchange, such as young womenfolk or jewellery. One solution would have been to offer to integrate on a less than equal footing i.e. as slaves. However, it does not seem likely that the migrating, extended family organisation would have been capable of dealing with such a complication. But as soon as settlement took place this changed and we have every reason to believe that pre-civilisation, tribal societies did indeed practice such a form of structured suppression<sup>1190</sup> and of course it is well established that the early civilisations in the ancient Near East functioned, to some degree at least, as slave economies: by exploiting prisoners of war in this way.

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<sup>1187</sup> Adam Smith, the early proponent of unregulated markets, noted that capitalists did not really want to compete with each other if they could avoid it: ‘People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices. ... And, if such a conspiracy results in monopoly power ... the monopolists, by keeping the market continually understocked, by never fully supplying the effectual demand, sell their commodities much above the natural price, and raise their emoluments, whether they consist in wages or profit, greatly above their natural rate. ... The price of monopoly ... is upon every occasion the highest which can be squeezed out of the buyers...’ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776. as quoted by Kit Sims Taylor *Human Society and the Global Economy* (The Web: 1996)

<sup>1188</sup> In the USA the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act, the 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act, the 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act and the 1916 Robinson-Patman Act etc.

<sup>1189</sup> Judging by the way in which the governments of the USA and Great Britain have recently seen fit to incarcerate foreigners without evidence or trial for an unlimited period of time, thereby undermining every principle of jurisprudence on which their much vaunted ‘free world’ is founded, this particular structure of suppression looks like being not just the oldest but also the most enduring.

<sup>1190</sup> See Hagar, Sarai’s Egyptian slave ‘maid’ (Gen 16.3).

Another important structure of suppression was patriarchy which in all probability emerged as a result of the competition stimulated by sedentarisation. It seems that in pre-civilisation, settled, tribal society the only people who really counted were the heads of families, usually grandfathers, since patriarchy rather than matriarchy was the general rule. Nowadays it is often supposed that patriarchy was a system of social organisation which discriminated against women. In point of fact, of course, in a patriarchy not just females but most males too were suppressed for the best part of their lives. Indeed, properly understood, the patriarchal system, at least in its negative aspects, was just another anti-competitive device designed to hamstring everyone but heads of families.

There was one further important structure of suppression which we have to consider: class. This phenomenon seems to have come about as a result of the competitive forces stimulated by the emergence of civilisation itself. It is well accepted now that the social divisions clearly identifiable within the civilisations of the ancient Near East<sup>1191</sup> operated in very much the same way as the feudal divisions in medieval Europe. These divisions permitted free competition within each social class while severely discouraging it between classes. In other words the divisions operated as structures of suppression, forcing most people to be content with a deliberately truncated role in society.

If I say that class is a crucial phenomenon in understanding the way in which civilisations develop it is not because I believe that its importance in the economic sphere makes it somehow more determinant of the way in which human societies change than either patriarchy or slavery. It is simply that Marx has analysed how class structures operated in our own European situation and this means we are now in a privileged position to build on his work.<sup>1192</sup> Marx demonstrated that though the establishment of the feudal class system initially engendered a considerable increase in productivity it none the less introduced contradictions between class interests which

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<sup>1191</sup> 'As for the social structure of the city-state ... it is clear ... that in Presargonic times the Sumerian society was divided into three main layers: at the bottom the slaves, usually recruited among prisoners of war or kidnapped in foreign countries but never very numerous; then those peasants and workers who served the temple or the palace, were maintained by them and possessed no land; and then the large group of landowners or 'freemen', which covers the whole range from artisans to members of the royal family. And above all these, of course, the ruler of the city-state about whom more will now be said.' George Roux *Ancient Iraq* (London: Penguin, 1966) First published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd in 1964. p. 129. See also C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky: 'By analysing the forces, relations and means of production, we can divide the world of Sumer into three social classes: 1) the upper, free class consisting of the rulers, nobility and merchants; 2) the semi-free serfs (the Gurus) or labourers without control or ownership in the means of production who were engaged in farming or craft production within the larger estates; 3) chattel slaves engaged in service.' *The Economic World of Sumer*. p. 66. Note how Roux carefully avoids the 'Marxist' notion of class!

<sup>1192</sup> As far as I am aware Marx himself was not interested in speculating as to how and why class systems arise in the first place. The only civilisation of which he had any firm knowledge was his own European one, since the revolution in archaeological study, on which all firm knowledge of ancient civilisations is inevitably founded, was only just beginning during the end part of his life. See Glyn Daniel: 'The revolution through archaeology in our knowledge of man's earliest civilizations took place in the seventy-five years that succeeded *The Origin of Species* (1859) and Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times* (1870).' *The First Civilisations* (London and Southampton: Book Club Associates, 1973) p. 21. Marx died in London in 1883.

inevitably had the effect of prohibiting further advances. He argued that, because of this, European society was only able to develop progressively to higher states by repeatedly attacking the class system which had been responsible for producing the initial gain. In the past, this process has all too often been presented deterministically as a natural evolution in which civilisation remorselessly and inevitably progresses towards a classless society.<sup>1193</sup> However, this was not what Marx had in mind. As he saw it, every occasion for social advance presents itself as no more than a *possibility* which the majority of the population can *realise* only by having the guts and intelligence to challenge and defeat the reactionary forces of the much smaller, but better equipped, ruling class whose interests lie in the maintenance of the status quo.<sup>1194</sup>

It is important to understand that Marx's thesis<sup>1195</sup> was built on the premise that social development comes about only through the exertion of proactive pressure i.e.: coercion. This is the reason why he argued that the process was essentially one of revolution and why he maintained that such a revolution could only occur when the suppressed classes were much more numerous than the ruling class itself. It is also the reason why he insisted that social change could not be brought about by a revolutionary leadership operating independently or out of step with the suppressed classes<sup>1196</sup> and why he believed that it was the proletariat who were destined to finally bring about the classless society<sup>1197</sup> – since, clearly, none of the social strata beneath the working class were in a position to exert the necessary proactive force.<sup>1198</sup>

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<sup>1193</sup> 'Wherever we find in expositions of Marxism any form of determinism, we may be sure that we are very far from any theory which can be attributed to Marx, yet it is frequently argued that Marx held a deterministic theory of social development. Thus we find in John Bowle's *Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century*, that he speaks of, "An inevitable predetermined process, an economic law of motion as ascertainable as the laws of physics." Karl Popper equates what he calls Marxist "historicism" with the predictive methods of Newtonian physics. Marx is supposed to show that if it is possible for astronomy to predict eclipses, then sociology can predict revolutions.' He is supposed to have pictured society moving inevitably through predetermined stages as a consequence of a mystic force, called the historical imperative; this rendering politics impotent and unnecessary.' John Lewis. *The Marxism of Marx* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972) p. 246.

<sup>1194</sup> 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.' The opening words of the Communist Manifesto. See also John Lewis: '... far from socialism arriving by the inevitable processes of history and social development, the maturing conditions require a conscious, hard-won battle of ideas, a revolution in the mind, and the active, responsible and energetic entry of millions of people into the difficult business of changing existing institutions. This is very far from an inevitable automatic process of evolutionary development.' John Lewis, *Marx*. p. 250.

<sup>1195</sup> That on encountering the contradictions which it has introduced through creating class structures civilisation either progresses towards a higher state, by eliminating these contradictions, or, failing that, descends into barbarism

<sup>1196</sup> '... the transition to socialism requires the enlightenment and willed participation not of a minority but of the overwhelming majority. Whatever the role of leading groups, nothing is possible without that. Nor can it be attained without struggle, since, as in every social advance, the interests of the majority must take precedence over the interests of the privileged, who are disposed to resist radical social change.' John Lewis. *Marx* pp. 22-3

<sup>1197</sup> 'This leaves one question still to be settled: who is to be the agent of this change? One view is that it will be a new elite; a highly trained, carefully selected minority, which alone knows what is for the good of humanity, and will liberate and lead their suffering fellow men. This was not Marx's view at

Like most Christians I was brought up to believe that Marx's thesis was fundamentally flawed because it did not take account of mankind's fallen state, i.e. of the difficulty, not to say impossibility, of human beings behaving radically differently from their primitive selves. This pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of change which, given their status quo interests, is common amongst members of the establishment, is not of course restricted to Christians. As John Lewis points out, whilst it is quite natural for people who are suppressed to long for a better world and to be indignant and distressed at the evils of society, it is equally natural for those actually making decisions and running society to regard such hopes as sentimental, unrealizable and dangerous dreams.<sup>1199</sup> However, having at last managed to unearth the god of the marginals in the biblical texts, what interests me now is to discover that, far from revealing Marx as an overly-optimistic naïf, this central biblical ideology would, if anything, suggest that he had not been optimistic enough in his estimation of man's ability to change his behaviour, given the right ideological approach. The truth is that the biblical writers who remained true to the Hebrew tradition operated on an understanding that, as a reactive force, the god of the marginals (acting of course in conjunction with and not independent of his people) was capable, through demonstration and exposure, of bringing about changes which civilisation was scarcely capable even of imagining<sup>1200</sup> and they represented this belief symbolically by describing the effects of the transformation in such improbable terms as wolves dwelling with lambs, leopards lying down with kids and lions eating straw like oxen.<sup>1201</sup> So, once again, I register a certain surprise at finding Marxism standing considerably closer to the biblical ideology than present day Christianity which, in building its understanding on the very dubious, not to say scarcely biblical notion of the fall, adopts a downright conservative, civilisation-stance.<sup>1202</sup>

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all. We shall only be able to overthrow "those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being", when the workers *as a class* become aware of their situation. it is not a minority, but a majority that must become enlightened that it may be emancipated.' John Lewis, *Marx* p. 94.

<sup>1198</sup> 'Suppose there does appear in some countries at the bottom of the social pyramid a class of the permanently impoverished and ill-housed. Marx placed no hope at all in the revolutionary possibilities of such a class, and never confused them with the reserve army of the unemployed or with those plunged into destitution by economic crisis. What he was on the look out for was an historic bloc largely composed of those organized workers capable of envisaging the next step.' John Lewis, *Marx* p. 153.

<sup>1199</sup> 'Recently we have had a stream of books, all claiming to speak in the name of anthropology, genetics and sociology, declaring that man having descended from predatory carnivores is himself predatory and a killer, that these traits are established genetically by the survival of the fittest and cannot be eradicated by education. . . . Reviews unanimously endorsed these views and concluded, for the most part, that "any idea of progress which ignores these ape-like qualities is doomed. . . . Man, and consequently his society, is immutable. The old adage, 'You can't change human nature' becomes true once more".' Lewis, *Marx* pp. 95-6, quoting from an article by Nicholas Tomlin in *The New Statesman*, September 15, 1967.

<sup>1200</sup> This of course explains why they had such disregard for the principle structures of civilisation – kingship and capitalism (usury). They were convinced that the transformations which would materialise if they kept faith with the god of the marginals would make the attempts made by civilisation to control its situation (e.g. cult prostitution and the adoption of children) ineffective if not counterproductive.

<sup>1201</sup> Is 11.6-9 & 65.25

<sup>1202</sup> As I have previously pointed out the Genesis account has nothing to say about such a fall which I believe is a Christian invention designed to contrast Jesus with Adam (e.g. Romans 5.12 and 1Cor 15.22). See Kaufmann Kohler's and Emil G. Hirsch's article *The Fall of Man* in

*JewishEncyclopedia.com*: 'The story of the fall of man is never appealed to in the Old Testament either



All this having been said, it has to be emphasised that if the Hebrews were extraordinarily optimistic about the possibility of getting human beings to change their ways it was not because they had rejected mythology and were working analytically from a scientific basis but simply because, given their situation as a dustbinned people, *in such an optimism lay their only hope*. As marginals they had no other redress than to place their confidence in a reactive strategy, in the power of the weak. This being the case they had a somewhat different outlook from Marx. They proceeded not in the certainty that if they operated scientifically, in a proper dialectical manner, they could count on defeating the class enemy, thus ushering in the liberation which comes with a classless society. On the contrary they were obliged to proceed in faith, hoping that, as a result of the basic rightness of their cause<sup>1203</sup> and of their boldness in advocating it in a purely reactive manner through demonstration and exposure, civilisation would be exposed and in the end shamed into changing its ways. In the meantime, of course, they also believed and hoped that they could count on the god of the marginals to protect them, in his own unforeseeable way, from the backlash which this strategy was bound at first to engender.

There are, of course, obvious difficulties and pitfalls in attempting to make a comparison between the biblical ideology and Marxism, given the thousands of years which separate them. However, it seem to me possible to say one thing with a fair degree of certainty: Hebrews would have had little cause to disagree with Marx's ideas had they been positioned socially alongside the skilled workers employed to build Egypt's royal monuments. If we can imagine them disagreeing, therefore, it would have been solely because their actual condition as trashed human beings enabled them to see something which civilisation folk – including Marx and most Christians – seem blind to: the fact that human beings are changed more effectively and durably by reactive pressure than by proactive pressure; by demonstration and exposure rather than by naked or even carefully disguised coercion. So, once again, we find everything coming back to this crucial divergence between the Hebrew ideology and that of civilisation.

Having dealt with class we must now briefly review the other two structures of suppression I have noted, in the light of this question as to whether civilisation-folk are right in believing that coercion is the only way of bringing about social development. It seems to me that even a cursory perusal of the issues involved should be enough to convince any disinterested observer that revolution, by itself, is incapable of resolving the social problems imposed by patriarchy or the enslavement of foreigners. For though in any society females make up half of the population no one would suppose that this of itself constitutes a sufficient balance of power to make a women's revolution

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as a historical event or as supporting a theological construction of the nature and origin of sin. The translation in the Revised Version of Job 31. 33 and Hosea 6. 7, even if correct, would not substantiate the point in issue, that the Old Testament theology based its doctrine of sin on the fall of Adam. The Garden of Eden is not even alluded to in any writings before the post-exilic prophets (Ezek. 28.13, 31.9; Isa. 51.3; but comp. Gen. 13.10) and even in these no reference is found to the Fall. The contention that, notwithstanding this surprising absence of reference to the story and the theme, the Hebrews of Biblical times nevertheless entertained the notion that through the fall of the first man their own nature was corrupted, is untenable. ... The fall of man, as a theological concept, begins to appear only in the late Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, probably under Essenic (if not Judæo-Christian) influences. ... While .. it is not altogether true that the fall of man had no place in the theology of the Talmudists, it is a fact that for the most part the foregoing notions were mere homiletical speculations that never crystallized into definite dogmas. ... In modern Jewish thought the fall of man is without dogmatic importance.'

<sup>1203</sup> Though not, of course, the righteousness of themselves!

feasible and if this is true for a women's revolution then it is even more true for a hypothetical revolution conducted by foreigner slaves. Indeed, I have previously pointed out that even in our modern, so-called advanced western societies the numerical inferiority of foreigners makes them fair game for suppression. The truth is that women, children and foreigners would have no real hope of achieving final liberation if Marx's presupposition about the need for coercion were correct. Indeed, seen in this light marginals, in advocating a reactive strategy, do not constitute a unique phenomenon. Rather they constitute the suppressed group at the extreme end of a continuous sliding scale of human power, the rule being that the less power you have the more you are forced to rely on other strategies than the organising of coercive force:<sup>1204</sup>

← Increasing possession of coercive force ... Increasing absence of coercive force →
Proletariat – Women – Homosexuals – Gypsies – Foreigners – Children – Marginals
← Increasing reliance on coercive force ... Increasing reliance on shaming tactics →

Of course, Marxists would rightly point out that some relatively powerless groups (e.g. women and even, in some cases, religious minorities) managed to achieve some degree of liberation during the course of some proletarian revolutions. However, there is little if anything in nineteenth or twentieth century experience to suggest that there was anything systematic about this relationship, making it possible for such minorities to count on it. Indeed, as I have already pointed out, the existence of the Gulags in the Soviet Union may well lead one to suppose that the classless society ushered in by the victory of the proletarian revolution has a natural tendency to marginalize those who do not fit in with its scheme of things, making it for many women, children and foreigners a phenomenon of terror rather than of liberation. If this tendency is true of the proletarian revolution then what can be said about other movements which count, to any degree, on coercion? If I am right in thinking that the women's liberation movement is a case in point then one has to ask oneself whether it too will tend to go the same way. On the whole I am optimistic but then ... clearly the touchstone will always be the viewpoint of those whom civilisation trashes:<sup>1205</sup> the marginals, or the 'Apiru/ Hebrews as the ancient near Eastern civilisations called them. This, of course, is the biblical viewpoint which most Jews and Christians, along with everyone else, seem now to have forgotten, if they ever truly recognised it.

Why do I say that the point of view of the marginals must always be the touchstone? Well, it seems to me that the only ones who are in a position to see and understand the defective way in which civilisation naturally operates are those who find themselves

<sup>1204</sup> Having constructed this sliding scale I am, of course, aware that people will immediately dispute the order in which I place the elements. However, my point is simply that these elements can properly be seen as situated on such a sliding scale and has nothing to do with judgements about where exactly a particular element should properly be positioned.

<sup>1205</sup> It should be clearly understood that exclusion and trashing are not the same things. Members of the lower classes, women and foreigners are excluded from the direction of society but not, of course, from society itself. Indeed, they find their proper place within society as excluded individuals. Marginals, in being trashed, are not considered to be members of society at all. The people in the ancient world called them dogs to indicate their subhuman status. They had a fear of them which can only be likened to our own fear of commies or reds.

trashed. Groups such as women, children, homosexuals, gypsies, foreigners and members of the lower classes who have been oppressed by being structurally excluded are certainly well situated to see this truth. But as actual groups they only ever see it in part, only incompletely and only for the time while they mount their revolutionary challenges. Once their objectives have been accomplished the militants in these movements inevitably tend to revert to excluding practices themselves as they work their way into positions of power as newly legitimated insiders – a phenomenon which, as we have seen, the Hebrews themselves encountered.



## Chapter 17

### **Minimalism, Foundation Myths and the 'Exile' Pattern**

During most of the twentieth century critical scholarship<sup>1206</sup> was content to base its research on Wellhausen's findings as these were set out in his documentary hypothesis. Such a situation indicated that just about everyone in this domain<sup>1207</sup> had during this period come to accept the idea that the texts of the hexateuch had been produced by the successive editing together of the sources designated as J, E, D and P, which were to be dated to the 9<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century respectively. However, towards the end of the century this comfortable agreement progressively broke down as a number of scholars began to raise suspicions about the early dates Wellhausen had attributed to these documents. They eventually concluded that he had based his judgments on the unwarranted assumption that the biblical texts contained a substantial amount of historical memory. These scholars have become known as the minimalists: because they take the contrary position that the biblical texts contain at best a minimal amount of historical memory.

#### *The Minimalists*

The fact that it has been possible in this way to pin-point the joint conclusion which these scholars came to, and so stick a label on them, should not be taken as indicating that their case was simple or that they all held identical points of view. As with most major shifts in opinion a number of different factors were involved and it is important to keep these separate in order to prevent the situation from becoming confused. I identify three kinds of argument employed by the minimalists.

#### *1. Arguments concerning time and memory*

The first type of argument stems from the common awareness that over the years memory, like everything else, slowly perishes. This being the case, where a claim about historical memory is concerned it is obviously necessary to consider carefully both the length of time over which it has had to operate and also the technologies which have been employed to enhance its operation (e.g. the use of poetry, writing etc.). In the case of the biblical texts we are dealing with what can only be described in human terms as vast expanses of time. Our oldest biblical manuscripts date from the beginning of the first century BCE, the edict of Cyrus authorising the return of the exiles to 538 BCE, the beginning of the monarchy and the reign of David to around 1000 BCE, the exodus and the Mosaic period to about 1250 BCE and the patriarchal era to the middle bronze age.<sup>1208</sup> This being the case a great deal hinges on when the technology of writing

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<sup>1206</sup> i.e. everyone excluding fundamentalists.

<sup>1207</sup> i.e. excluding Christian and Jewish fundamentalists.

<sup>1208</sup> Anything between 1850 BCE and 1650 BCE.

became available since the techniques of oral tradition, even used with great skill, would hardly have enabled a tradition to endure over such a time-scale. Looking at things from this perspective the minimalists came to the conclusion that if Wellhausen had advocated early dates for his sources it had only been because he wished to give their content credibility in the historical memory stakes. It also occurred to them that, though the archaeological evidence shows that the alphabetic script was certainly available for use in central Palestine from the very beginning of the first millennium BCE, all the signs are that 'there was only a modicum of literacy before the late monarchy period'<sup>1209</sup> suggesting that Wellhausen's early dates for J and E were suspect.

## 2. Arguments concerning history and philosophy

A second type of argument has been based on the growing awareness over the last century that the way in which people look at history has substantially changed over the years. Not only has it become increasingly evident that ancient people viewed history quite differently from the way we do (and even possibly in slightly different ways from each other) but it is also increasingly evident that we, now, in the so-called 'post modern' age are beginning to view history somewhat differently from the way in which even our own fathers did. For whereas they tended to consider 'the past' as just another subject matter for scientific investigation, we are now far more conscious of the difficulty, not to say impossibility, of recovering such a thing even if it can be said to exist meaningfully at all. For this reason we now tend to see historiography not so much as a way of recovering and preserving human memories of what had happened in the past, as a way in which people exploit or even invent a past in order to take hold of and colonise the present.<sup>1210</sup> Looking at things from this perspective the minimalists came to the conclusion that in talking about the history of their community biblical writers were not in fact concerned (as previous historians had assumed) to preserve their past, of which they apparently knew comparatively little. Thus Keith Whitlam claimed that their ambition was rather to communicate about their present, of which they had relatively full possession. Given this situation the minimalists have come to the conclusion that their task as historians is primarily to understand the *Sitz im Leben* of the post-exilic writers who put the text together as we now know it, to deduce from this their ideological position; and to see how this ideology was reflected in the way in which the post-exilic writers dealt with the traditional material at hand.<sup>1211</sup> For the minimalists, therefore, any historical material which the post exilic writers somewhat unconsciously preserved about the past can only be used tentatively in a secondary

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<sup>1209</sup> Van Seters, *Prologue* p. 41.

<sup>1210</sup> 'Accounts of the past .. are in competition, explicitly or implicitly. They are written or heard at a particular moment in time, addressed to a known audience which has certain expectations, and designed to persuade. ... Rather than presenting evidence for some past reality, they offer, like many such accounts from modern and traditional societies, evidence for the politics of the present.' Whitlam *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (London & New York, Routledge, 1996) p. 30. 6

<sup>1211</sup> 'The realization that accounts of the past are invariably the products of a small elite and are in competition with other possible accounts, of which we may have no evidence, ought to lead to greater caution in the use of such accounts to construct Israelite history. Their value for the historian lies in what they reveal of the ideological concerns of their authors, if, and only if, they can be located in time and place.' Whitlam, *Invention* p. 33.

manner,<sup>1212</sup> in close conjunction with hard evidence obtained from elsewhere.

### *3. Arguments concerning science and religion*

A third type of argument has developed out of peoples' experience of the way in which, over the years, theology had surreptitiously used its political muscle to control the evidence which emerged as a result of the work of the new sciences of biblical history and archaeology. This awakening to what has surreptitiously been going on has been due not simply to the fact that these new sciences (largely originated by individuals with religious backgrounds) have now come of age and so are capable of defending their patches. It has also been influenced by the fact that the numbers of secular university departments has grown whereas that of seminaries has diminished. The minimalists have used this new awareness as an argument for actively excluding religious views as far as their own historical projects are concerned. They do not deny religious people the right to work with the biblical material separately, in their own manner. They do, however, deny them a place in their own discussions for they maintain that in the spheres of history and archaeology theology can only operate to falsify the record.<sup>1213</sup> I call this the 'two conversations' scenario, where two distinct discussions about the biblical material are allowed for without either being permitted to interfere with the other; one conversation being historical and scientific and the other being theological and faith-centred.

Unsurprisingly these findings created quite a furore in the normally tranquil world of academia. Minimalists make much of the fact that some of their number lost their jobs in prestigious religious establishments as a result of the stance they took, and it has to be said the reaction to their work has been unusually ferocious especially in Israel. Undeniably the situation remains polarized, which means that it is difficult for someone like myself to enter the debate without being seen as taking sides. The fact is, however, that though I agree with the minimalists on a number of important issues, on the one point which really matters to me – the existence (or not) of the god of the margins in or out of the Bible – I find that I am just as much at loggerheads with them as am with their maximalist opponents.

### *The Marginal-Ideology Disciple*

Though I seek to participate in discussions which traditionally have come to be seen as either 'religious' or 'academic' and though I was theologically trained, I write neither as a priest nor as a scholar.<sup>1214</sup> Perhaps I can best describe my stance as that of a

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<sup>1212</sup> 'Recent literary studies have alerted us to the fact that it is no longer possible simply to scan narratives for the few useful facts which provide the basis for an expanded modern account while discarding the rest of the narrative as secondary or unimportant. Any such facts are so embedded in the [narrative] that it directs an interpretation of them.' Whitlam, *Invention* p. 30.

<sup>1213</sup> I can think of no better argument against theologians and biblical scholars continuing to dominate archaeology and historical research than that it has kept them from reading the texts that should be the centre of their research.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 37.

<sup>1214</sup> I was ordained as a minister in the Church of Scotland but that was something of an accident of history. I never earned my living as a cleric and my allegiance has always been to the Bible and the ministry of the word which I consider to be an ideological matter. I sometimes wonder whether I have

marginal-ideology disciple. Since all human beings are ideological, in that as a result of consciousness they all operate with world views which define their ethical reflection, the fact that I profess to having a particular ideology makes me no different from anyone else. However, as a marginal-ideology *disciple* I admit to *advocating* a particular ideology which, I suppose, puts me in a militant category. Minimalists will take objection to my profession of militancy saying that as one who avowedly follows an ideological path I am, as they see it, a fanatic and as such not a fit person to take part in their 'history of Israel' project, since I lack a necessary neutrality and objectivity.<sup>1215</sup> In my defence I would make a number of points:

- a) I quite accept the need for objectivity. All of us, and not just historians, have an obligation to report as accurately and truthfully as we can how we see things from the existential position we occupy. However, such an objectivity is not to be confused with an ideology-free vision which is a figment of imagination: a pretence that whereas others clearly have a biased position we are objective and unbiased.<sup>1216</sup>
- b) In pretending that they can be objective (ideologically neutral) when doing historical research academics are simply kidding themselves: writing from some mainstream ideological perspective without flagging up the fact or perhaps even being aware of it. I have never come across an ideologically unbiased historian, unsurprisingly, since such a thing cannot conceivably exist. As insiders this obvious truth may escape academic historians but to an outsider like myself it is only too evident. For my money it is far better to declare your ideological position so that others can make allowances than to hide behind a feigned ideological neutrality.
- c) Though *discipleship* can certainly descend into *following blindly*, and so into *fanaticism*<sup>1217</sup> the marginal-ideology discipleship I am engaged in is vitiated just as soon as the disciple closes his or her eyes. In other words god-of-the-marginals discipleship and fanaticism are incompatible. In this regard belief-schemes of any sort present a danger because they can only be adopted by those

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been true to my vows of ordination which, of course, concerned a ministry of word *and sacrament*. At the time I did not see things as clearly as I do now and consented to be ordained because, while I was not sold on religion, I had no particular axe to grind against it. However, practically speaking it became all too apparent that it simply wasn't me, despite the fact that I remained fundamentally committed to the god of the marginals.

<sup>1215</sup> My counter accusation is that, however ideologically neutral scholars pretend to be, their work shows that it is as much controlled by ideology as mine is; the significant difference between us being that I admit the fact whereas they don't. My basic contention is that because of their unavowed civilisation-stances scholars of every shade and hue misread the biblical texts, whether deliberately or otherwise; their comfortable positions in the world of scholarship being threatened by the biblical tradition of radical solidarity, demanding as it does both obedience and a constant willingness to forego privilege.

<sup>1216</sup> I encountered this problem as a trade unionist when representing my fellow workers in disputes with management. I found that managers simply took it for granted that their view of matters was objective whereas mine as a trade unionist was biased. The fact was, of course, that both of our views were biased only theirs was the bias of the ruling class!

<sup>1217</sup> The metacosmic god became the means by which, over the years, people in the biblical tradition often illegitimately descended into pure religion and fanaticism. Since I have called ideological discipleship 'revolutionary' I have accordingly labeled this illegitimate descent into pure religion as revisionism.



- who shutter their minds. The believer may be aware that he or she does not know everything but, as far as what he or she considers matters, the mind is already made up. With this danger in mind I have developed a rule of thumb that the marginal-ideology disciple must constantly live on the frontier between theism and atheism – *for the latter, too, constitutes a belief-system strenuously to be avoided*. So marginal-ideology disciples have to navigate not by belief but by what the Gospels call faith. This faith is simply defined as an eye-open attitude to the world, where all pretence (including theism and atheism) is eschewed, faith being seen not as the accomplice of belief but rather as its adversary.
- d) Modern historians appear to be under the illusion that the enlightenment was an eye-opening exercise in which the clouding power of religious superstition was finally removed. This may have been true in part but, fundamentally, the enlightenment involved nothing more complicated than a change in linguistics; the discovery of a way of communicating which avoided the superstition-trap by using analytic rather than descriptive language. As a change in linguistics the enlightenment guaranteed nothing as regards speaking truthfully about the reality revealed to human consciousness. For the fact is that there were people who did this more or less adequately using the old religious linguistics just as there are people who do it more or less inadequately using the new scientific linguistics.
- e) As far as the god-of-the-marginals ideology is concerned militancy is a necessity, not an option, since its viewpoint is established by shaming which is an ever-ongoing process. Only disciples of coercive ideologies which have been victorious can assume a non-militant air ... until their position comes under attack at which point they too show their true colours.
- f) I claim my stance is ideological not religious. However, it is true that I try to find a place for the essentially religious notion of the metacosmic god. To those who wish to exclude religion from historical debate this may seem like ostentatiously excluding religion by the front door while smuggling it in again at the back. However, as I see it, all the metacosmic idea consists of is an imaginative hunch – of which I seek to make nothing. Its purpose is solely to find room for the god-of-the-marginals approach. Put it like this. If you grant (as most people do) that ‘survival of the fittest’ is not the principle by which we should govern our civilisation – even though it quite obviously rules in the natural realm – then it is necessary not only to postulate an alternative higher principle to which ‘survival of the fittest’ must, in the ideological realm at least, give way but also to find room for this higher principle in the universe by means of some imaginative hunch – as, for example, by introducing the metacosmic idea. There is, as far as I can see, nothing here outside the sort of speculation which is necessary in order to be able even to discuss such important matters as politics, ethics and morality.

#### *A Critical Examination of the Minimalist Position*

We surely have to congratulate the minimalists for arguing that the Bible should be accorded no special treatment and that its account of Israel's history should be

scrutinised just as carefully and critically as is possible. For nothing is to be gained in hypocritically defending it from sceptical enquiry. Furthermore, we must surely welcome their cataloguing of the past errors of scholarship – especially in the domain of archaeology – as a long overdue move to put their own house in order. It is also right to congratulate them for forcing everyone to consider a great deal more seriously what the biblical writers were doing when they wrote their history; as it is to thank them for taking much more serious note of the massive time-scales involved in biblical history and the problems entailed in talking vaguely about the trustworthiness of oral traditions. Finally, we surely also have to applaud their action in putting the last few nails in the coffin of Salvation History, denouncing this illicit attempt to solve the problem of the Yahwist's ideology by smuggling Christian theories of redemption into the Old Testament. All of this demolition work has to be unreservedly praised as an invaluable exercise well worth the loss of a few prestigious university jobs, and if saying so marks me out as a minimalist fellow traveller then I welcome the label.

However, I find myself strangely unwilling to ascribe the minimalists' ground-clearing exercise simply to a laudable desire to have matters open and above board. For as a god-of-the-marginals disciple I can't help noticing how successful they have been in dragging people's attention away from the pre-exilic texts, where the Hebrew 'revolutionary' ideas are mainly situated, and concentrating it instead on the post-exilic passages where the god of the marginals is often notably absent. As I have said, previous scholarship had sought to keep these uncomfortable 'revolutionary' ideas in check by wrapping them up in illicit Christian patterns, thus rendering the Bible 'safe' for public consumption. Minimalists have now removed redemption and salvation history from the Old Testament, something which, for scholarly reasons, had to happen and every right-minded person must surely applaud. However, no one should be under the illusion that this was done *in order to uncover the 'revolutionary' texts which had so unjustifiably been hidden*. For scholars – civilisation's clerks – that would have been an uncharacteristic thing to do. Indeed, it would seem that the minimalists are just as intent on burying the Bible's obnoxious 'revolutionary' ideas as previous scholars had been. The only difference is that they have an even more foolproof way of doing this: *by denying historicity to the texts in which such ideas are commonly found and by attributing historicity only to those texts from which they are basically absent!*

What the minimalists have effectively done in denying historicity to the pre-exilic texts is to banish forever the 'revolution'/revisionism pattern, leaving the post-exilic religious scheme of the transcendent God to rule the roost. Unlike Henry VIII they allow us to read the Bible in our own language but only on condition that we agree to put a post-exilic, religious slant on it which clearly alters its ideological meaning. Given that, by and large, the minimalists adopt an atheist stance, this raises the uncomfortable possibility that only a religious community is capable of giving room, albeit grudgingly and fearfully, to the god-of-the-marginals idea. I hate saying this because I have always been critical of religious communities and insisted that the Bible is not their special preserve. I have looked, therefore, to atheists to prove that some of them too are capable of facing up to the Bible's mind-blowing, subversive ideas and of addressing the feet-moving issue it raises, though I can't say for the moment that I have found such a one.

### *The 'exile' pattern as a foundation myth*

According to the minimalists the fundamental pattern which governs their understanding of the biblical texts is the myth of the exile. As they see it this myth was expressly designed to deny the reality – the fact that the returning, so-called exiles were in truth a new ruling class which the Persians were imposing on the province of Yehud – by establishing them as returning *natives* rather than as the *foreigners* they in all probability were. For the minimalists this 'exile' pattern has two basic aspects: continuity and discontinuity. The continuity aspect is important in giving legitimacy to the new ruling class, the discontinuity aspect in distinguishing the set-up they created from what proceeded it. Yehud was, as they see it, *a radically new society*.<sup>1218</sup> So, as the minimalists understand the situation, this 'foundation myth' of exile constitutes the ideological superstructure of the post-exilic community established by the ruling class under the Persians after 538 BCE. The myth operated as the control mechanism whereby the new community created its own self-justifying literature: the Jewish Bible. This literature was, therefore, properly speaking, the invention of these ruling immigrants, since, although when writing their texts they must have made use of what traditional material was available to them (not everything was simply imagined from scratch) this was consciously moulded to embody the 'exile' ideology. This is why, so they say, we find the pattern of people being exiled and returning so often repeated in the Old Testament, as for example in the stories of the exodus, the wanderings in the desert, and the conquest of the land.<sup>1219</sup>

#### 1. The foundation myth as a control mechanism

Before examining the content of this pattern let us for a moment consider this business of a foundation myth supposedly used as a control mechanism by those intent on creating a national literature. This scheme is the cornerstone around which the minimalists construct their entire reading of the biblical texts, so it obviously needs substantiation. This is how Niels Lemche goes about the job:

It is certainly not unusual for people to possess their own foundation myth. It is as a matter of fact a quite common, almost universal phenomenon, that any group - ethnic, national, political, religious, and occupational - will be in possession of a narrative about its foundation known to and accepted by its membership.<sup>1220</sup>

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<sup>1218</sup> 'To explain the existence of the biblical literature, we must conclude that the creation of what was in truth a *new society*, marking a definitive break with what had preceded, was accompanied by-or at least soon generated-an ideological superstructure which denied its more recent origins, its imperial basis, and instead indigenized itself. Its literate class (within the golai-society) created an identity continuous with kingdoms that had previously occupied that area, of whom no doubt some concrete memory remained within Palestine, and very probably some archival material too, and wrote into the history of their region an 'Israel' which explained their own post-'exilic' society and the rights and privileges of the immigrant elite within that society.' Davies, *In Search* p. 87.

<sup>1219</sup> 'This process did not occur suddenly, nor was it ever entirely coherently accomplished. But the end product formed the major part of what we now know as the biblical literature.' Davies, *In Search* p. 87. 'The narrative about Israel's history is created by its authors to connect the two foundation myths, the one about the exodus and the treacherous fathers who had to be punished, and the other about the Babylonian exile and the restoration to please the Jews of later times.' Niels Peter Lemche, *Israelites*, (London: SPCK, 1999) p. 94

<sup>1220</sup> Lemche, *Israelites* p. 88-89.

Lemche's argument here is so ambiguous, sliding as it does from an assertion that foundation myths are not unusual ... to in fact quite common ... to being almost universal in any sort of imaginable situation, without any attempt being made actually to define what they are, that it inspires little confidence that he knows what he is talking about. This feeling is reinforced when he goes on to offer a couple of examples by way of illustration:

Among the more famous myths belonging to this genre is from ancient times the tale of the founder of Rome, Romulus. Romulus was brought up, together with his brother Remus, by a wolf, which in the version of Livy saved the twins from the Tiber where they were to be drowned. Another example is the legend of Sargon of Akkad, who was exposed on the river but saved and brought up by a fisherman in a way closely resembling the myth of the birth of Moses. This Sargon was to become the creator of a mighty empire.

It is true, of course, that Sargon became the creator of a mighty empire but the fact is that the whole point of the *legend* (as it is generally referred to) concerning him is, first, that Sargon was a foreigner and, second, that the community which adopted him existed long before he came along. In this regard the Sargon legend is quite similar to the story of Idrimi<sup>1221</sup> who, if the suspicions of modern historians are correct, was also an usurper and not a junior member of the royal family as he made himself out to be.<sup>1222</sup> Since no one that I know of speaks about the Idrimi story as a foundation myth I cannot see how the Sargon legend can possibly be taken as one either, even on Lemche's own conspicuously ill-defined terms. The Romulus and Remus story, on the other hand, can justly be labelled a foundation myth since clearly it was designed *to establish the ideology and political standing of a new community through the telling of a story about its mythical founder*. In other words, the story of Romulus and Remus can reasonably be classified as a foundation myth because Romulus is said to be the founder of Rome, as his name implies. I am therefore happy to use it as a control for the genre.

Lemche continues his argument by pointing out that foundation myths, such as the Romulus and Remus story, are capable of developing as successive writers work on the tale.<sup>1223</sup> He uses this as a way of introducing a peculiar feature of the alleged Jewish foundation myth – the fact that there are two of them, a foundation myth of the sons and a foundation myth of the fathers:

The peculiar thing about the foundation myth of Judaism, however, is that it is not the only one. As a matter of fact, it is closely paralleled in another foundation myth, the myth of the origin of the fathers, a myth that follows a course that is almost identical with the one belonging to the sons. This myth can be identified as the myth about the miraculous salvation of the Israelite people from their oppressors in Egypt and the covenant with Yahweh, who through a human agent, Moses, saved his chosen people from serfdom in a foreign country. A period of many generations, in all 430 years (Ex. 12:40), preceded this liberation. During this time Israel stayed in Egypt after its forefather Jacob, the first Israel (Gen. 32:29) and thus the apical ancestor of the people, had first travelled there from the land of Canaan during a season of famine (Genesis 46).

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<sup>1221</sup> A fact which Thompson recognises. See *Bible*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>1222</sup> 'A historical reconstruction of how Idrimi came to power in the kingdom Mukish shows that, instead of being a hero, he was obviously a foreign usurper, in fact an illegitimate king (although he may - as maintained by himself - have been of noble blood from the royal line of Aleppo).' Lemche, *Israelites*, p. 25.

<sup>1223</sup> 'Sometimes such origin myths may change, being replaced by other tales, or the old and the new myth may blend together to form one narrative. This happened when the myth that the Romans descended from Trojans was made famous by Virgil's epic *The Aeneid*, then combined with the Romulus legend in Livy's history.' Lemche *Israelites* p. 89.

Lemche never explains why post-exilic writers thought it necessary to invent a second, pre-exilic foundation myth to parallel the exilic one. As if this were not hard enough to swallow he then proceeds to draw attention to a third parallel structure. He tells us that Abraham's move from Canaan to Egypt and back again, described in Genesis 12 and 13, should also be taken into account, though for some reason he does not refer to this story as a foundation myth.<sup>1224</sup> This is somewhat surprising, given that there is nothing to distinguish it from the story in Exodus (the two stories have quite clearly been drawn as parallels<sup>1225</sup>). It seems to me that Lemche introduces this curious idea of parallel foundation myths<sup>1226</sup> – one for the fathers and another for the sons – because he realises that the Mosaic birth story is based on the Sargon legend which he takes to be a foundation myth itself. His logic presumably is that if the Sargon legend is a foundation myth (which, of course, we have decided it can't possibly be) then the Moses legend must also be one too, or part of one at least. The fact is, of course, that logic itself dictates that there can only be *one* foundation myth for each community. Furthermore, as a *unique* story it has to come at the beginning of the community's history in the form of a prelude, as the story of Romulus and Remus demonstrates. Therefore *if* there is such a thing as a foundation myth in the Bible, which I am far from being persuaded is the case, then it would have to be the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden since it is clear that this episode represents the mythical beginnings of the Biblical community called Israel.<sup>1227</sup>

My problem at this point in talking about foundation myths is that the Romulus and Remus story is the only example so far introduced which I am persuaded is the genuine article ... unless we can also include Davies' suggestion of the story of the Pilgrim Fathers:

... the 'exile' is, if not a myth in the sense of an event that did not occur, then at least an interpretation of a transportation out of, and later a transportation into, Judah which turned historical discontinuity into continuity. In that respect the exile is the central myth of the biblical account of the past. The immigrants, like the Pilgrim Fathers, had their minority experience come to determine the identity of the majority whose real history was different.

If Davis is right foundation myths have to be seen as the product of new adventurous communities possessing ideologies of dominance; such an understanding fits well with Rome, the early American settlers and post-exilic Yehud. The production of a foundation myth would therefore be a way for an adventurous community to psych itself up, demonstrating that it meant business. This being the case, societies with revolutionary beginnings, such as Athens and the Hebrew community of Israel<sup>1228</sup> would not have experienced the need for a foundation myth since they had other motivating forces to work with, such as memories of actual revolutionary endeavours.

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<sup>1224</sup> See also Davies who multiplies the number of foundation myths even further: '... this central paradox, by which the immigrants displaced the indigenous, manifested itself in other narratives too, celebrating an original 'Israel' that was brought into the 'promised land' from outside, and distinguished itself radically and polemically from the indigenous population. There are in the biblical literature several such stories of origin, including the stories of Abraham, the Exodus and the conquest.' *In Search* p. 87-8. So now we have a fourth and fifth foundation myth or pseudo foundation myth!

<sup>1225</sup> See p. 206-207 above.

<sup>1226</sup> It should be noted that Lemche's hypothesis dictates that there should be two foundation myths not three or more.

<sup>1227</sup> See p. 180 above.

<sup>1228</sup> Whatever it was and whenever it first saw the light of day.

Furthermore, the fact that no such constructs have been properly identified in their cases could be taken as an indication that, with them, we are dealing with revolutionary communities of one sort or another.<sup>1229</sup>

To conclude, I am happy with the idea that P and his friends *may* have turned the story of the exile into their new community's foundation myth – though I am not at all certain where such a thing is actually to be found in the texts. I am also willing to accept that these gentlemen *could* have edited the community's pre-existing, traditional material to make it fit with their new thinking<sup>1230</sup> – though this is not, of course, the minimalists' argument. However, what I cannot accept for a moment is the minimalists' essential thesis that the biblical literature in all its extensiveness was actually conceived by P and his friends in accordance with this new pattern of thought.<sup>1231</sup> For I have been shown no convincing evidence for it and it seems to me that such a thesis is, in itself, exceedingly unlikely. I know that writers are in the habit of creating texts which echo earlier literature and I am aware that editors often revisit earlier texts, adjusting them to their own patterns of thought. However, what is proposed here is something quite outside my experience – people creating a foundation myth for their new community and then inventing an entire literature which echoes this new pattern of thinking not forwards but backwards! I cannot say that it is inconceivable but I have to say that I find it distinctly unlikely for at least three reasons.

1. If the Jewish Bible as a whole is based on this 'exile' foundation myth then why can't I find it clearly set out somewhere?
2. If the biblical texts were actually created so as to echo this 'exile' foundation myth then why has this not been obvious over the years and why has it only become obvious to the minimalists themselves at this particular point in time?<sup>1232</sup>
3. Why would people bother to create a complete literature to back up a foundation myth when a simple foundation myth on its own would have been much more

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<sup>1229</sup> It may be thought that the Exodus is Israel's foundation myth incorporating the Moses legend. However, Israel is described in the Exodus as an existing community just like the community of Akkadia in the Sargon legend. In other words the Exodus is a crucial incident *within* the nation's life which means that it cannot be a foundation myth. In fact, of course, a revolutionary understanding does see the Exodus as the beginning of something radically new – a 'revolutionary' community – but, as we have said, revolutionary communities have no use for foundation myths. They characteristically tell stories of how the revolution took place, not fictitious tales about the founding fathers of the community.

<sup>1230</sup> After the pattern of the chronicler.

<sup>1231</sup> See Davies 'Not every major biblical myth makes the best possible sense in the light of the conditions implied in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and indeed some may be later. But cumulatively, an impressive case can be made for the fifth century BCE as the time and Yehud as the place for formation of what biblical scholars call the 'biblical tradition', and what can more simply and accurately be called the biblical literature.' Davies, *In Search* p. 92.

<sup>1232</sup> It seems to me that the minimalists and the exponents of the New Hermeneutic operate in a very similar manner, though, of course, in different Testaments. Both make 'discoveries' about the Bible (controlling foundation myths in the case of the minimalists and the way in which parables work in the case of the New Hermeneutic) which involve seeing biblical 'authors' (P and his friends in the case of the minimalists and Jesus in the case of the New Hermeneutic) as responsible for communicational breakthroughs involving the use of unheard-of literary constructs (backward-echoing foundation myths in the case of the minimalists and Kafkaesque, non-referential, illustrative stories in the case of the New Hermeneutic). What surprises me is that it never seems to occur to the people who make such 'discoveries' that these novel techniques of communication don't seem to have worked until they themselves 'discovered' them!

effective?

Looking at things, therefore, from the broad perspective of literary patterns it seems to me that there is little credibility, to say the least, in the minimalists' idea that P and his friends were responsible for actually creating the biblical material either through pure invention or through a thorough reworking of traditional material. It is easy to imagine the leaders of an adventurous community like post-exilic Jehud using traditional material to invent a short and pithy 'exile'-foundation-myth to motivate themselves and it is easy to see them then editing the traditional material in their possession to make it fit with this new understanding of themselves. However, it is quite another matter to propose that the leaders of such a community used this 'exile' myth as a control mechanism in order to create a national literature in the shortest space of time, using the facilities of their scribal academies. For why would they have done such a thing? Foundation myths are not improved by the invention of a fictitious 'national literature' to sustain them. It seems to me that this whole scenario has been created simply to deprive the pre-exilic texts of historicity and to give them as late a date as is feasible – a tactic which is just as dubious as that of Wellhausen which it seeks to reverse.

## 2. The content of the 'exile' foundation myth

Let us now narrow our perspective by turning to the content of this 'foundation myth' to see if it can throw any light on the above disagreement. The minimalists themselves sum this content up as 'continuity within discontinuity'. As far as the continuity angle is concerned the implications are obvious for without the story of the exile the incomers would naturally have been treated as unwelcome foreigners. The only controversial aspect of this proposal is the implication that some or all of these incomers may well have been foreigners only pretending to be the sons and daughters of those who had previously been exiled. There is, of course, no indication in the texts that the newcomers' claim to be Israelites was ever questioned by the indigenous population but this, of course, tells us nothing since these natives left no spokesperson to represent their point of view.

As regards the discontinuity angle the implications are more interesting. The minimalists claim the post-exilic leaders used this aspect to acquire *carte blanche* for what they were doing by stressing the newness of the community and its radical difference to all that came before. They did this, Lemche says, by painting the former community in the blackest of terms, describing them as 'a depraved people, a people who cannot understand, who have been warned, but nevertheless are following in the footsteps of their fathers, forgetting their God, a people to be swept away and punished.'<sup>1233</sup> In this way the exile could be projected as bringing about an emphatic demarcation between generations of Israelites. On the one hand it was depicted as God's way of chastising the sinful fathers and excluding them from the land; on the other as his way of purifying the innocent sons (as well as the land itself<sup>1234</sup>) so that they

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<sup>1233</sup> Lemche, *Israelites* p. 86.

<sup>1234</sup> '... at the end catastrophe struck just as prophesied and the people had to go into exile for seventy years (Jer. 29:10), and the country could have its rest (2 Chron. 36:21, with a reference to Jeremiah).' Lemche *Israelites* p. 87. See also Davies, *In search* p. 42.

could return to Jerusalem as a remnant and become an ideal nation.<sup>1235</sup>

However, the trouble with this scenario is that it flies in the face of the course of events which the prophetic texts actually describe. Here the remnant are seen as resulting from a process of *purification*, involving repeated *refining*. This cannot possibly be squared with a post-exilic interpretation of the exile as a *generational* process of dying out.<sup>1236</sup> For in such a process, as the minimalists themselves are at pains to point out, one entity is rejected in favour of another, whereas in a purification refining process a single entity is purged through suffering<sup>1237</sup> and so transformed into a fitting instrument for carrying out the job it has been given to do but failed to accomplish.<sup>1238</sup> The fact is that, whereas the 'generational supersession' process clearly belongs with the post-exilic, revisionist pattern, in which a clean break is made with Israel's past (including such things as possible 'revolutionary' beginnings) the prophets' 'refining process' equally clearly belongs with the 'revolutionary' pattern in which Israel is seen as being forged anew and given a second chance to complete the task<sup>1239</sup> she had refused to carry out the first time round. In this regard it is noticeable that the minimalists *never* speak of Israel as actively having a job to do after the fashion of Isaiah's light to lighten the Gentiles. Using the revisionist spectacles provided by P and his friends they see Israel's concern as simply to be passively obedient to the will of the inscrutable, transcendent God, thereby becoming an ideal nation rewarded with blessedness.<sup>1240</sup> It may seem at first sight that there is little to distinguish between these positions since both counsel *reactive* rather than *proactive* strategies (*obedience*, on the one hand, and *demonstration and exposure*, on the other). However, the difference is in fact immense since the revisionist approach – commonly described as legalism<sup>1241</sup> – constitutes a *negative* attitude to life which flees feet-moving responsibility, as Pharisaism later showed, whereas the 'revolutionary' approach, of demonstration and exposure, constitutes a *positive* attitude in which feet-moving responsibility is assumed, as Jesus demonstrated *against* the Pharisees.

But this is not all, for there is another dislocation between the post-exilic scenario of 'continuity through discontinuity' and the actual content of the prophetic texts. These portray the exile as a process that, on coming to an end, was greeted by second Isaiah as

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<sup>1235</sup> 'Without the idea of an exile there could be nothing like the purified remnant of Isaiah, residing on Mount Zion under the palladium of their God. The disconnection between the generations had to be established, because without the exile which person would have been able to tell the son from his father? Who could say, "This person, the son, is doing his duties to the Lord, while his father has sinned and will be punished"? Without an exile, how could it be established who was punished and who was saved from it, who was cursed and who was blessed? It would be like Proverbs, where the transgressor will always be punished, while the pious person will survive and prosper. ... The myth of the exile was therefore created as a program for the return to the country of God, where a new and ideal nation of God should be established. This new nation should consist of the holy ones, the purified remnant. They had no part in the abominations of the past.' Lemche, *Israelites* p. 87-8.

<sup>1236</sup> As happened, for example, when the Israelites refused to enter into the promised land and so were destined to wander in the wilderness until all of them, including Moses, had succumbed.

<sup>1237</sup> e.g. Zech 13. 7-9; Is 48.9-11; Mal 3.1-4.

<sup>1238</sup> e.g. Is 42.6-7.

<sup>1239</sup> i.e. Exposure through demonstration.

<sup>1240</sup> Thus Davies '... the conflicting accounts of Israel's origins point to a situation in which the definition of the 'ideal' Israel was in the process of being formed.' *In Search* p. 92.

<sup>1241</sup> i.e. unthinking obedience as regards the letter of the Law.



a sign of Israel's *forgiveness*.<sup>1242</sup> It is noticeable that the minimalists skirt around the idea of forgiveness in the prophetic texts.

'As far as the 'exile' itself is concerned, the biblical literature presents it both as a punishment and then also as a mercy: it punishes the wicked nation and then preserves it intact ready for reinstallation in the land promised to it.'<sup>1243</sup>

Here Davies avoids the notion and all that it entails by substituting the idea of mercy understood as a concession allowing the nation to survive against the odds. In this way he adjusts the concept to what he believes is P's and his friends' discontinuous-generations thesis. But Isaiah clearly had much more than a mere concession in mind. He speaks about what happened in the exile as a blotting out of the past, which made all things possible once again for the chosen community.<sup>1244</sup> This shows just how wrong Davies is when he writes that 'the biblical "exile" is a means of preserving [the community].'<sup>1245</sup> That *may* have been the way in which P and his friends viewed the exile but it was certainly not how Isaiah saw the matter and I can't help thinking that Davis must know this. What Isaiah lays before his readers is an astonishingly powerful concept involving forgiveness as a lifegiving act<sup>1246</sup> which, in wiping out the past, provides a second chance for the community to perform in a 'revolutionary' way as the light to lighten the Gentiles. What Davies reveals in his post-exilic reading of the Isaianic text is, by comparison, something altogether banal: a simple concession (the sons will not be held responsible for the sins of the fathers) which merely allowed the community, in the form of a new generation, to stumble blindly on from pillar to post without any light, the 'revolutionary' ideology now being denied.<sup>1247</sup> Were Davies right (which fortunately is not the case) we would be forced to conclude that the book of Isaiah merits no attention from people like ourselves living 2,500 years later, its only interest being for those with antiquarian concerns, like Davies himself.

The fact is that neither the logic of forgiveness nor that of purification and refining makes any sense at all in the context of a discontinuity between generations. For the old generation had no need for refining if they were not in some sense to return to their land<sup>1248</sup> and the new generation had no need of forgiveness if they had committed no fault. In short, this whole idea of a radical discontinuity between generations (if indeed it exists at all in the biblical texts dealing with the exile) is a revisionist betrayal which has no place in the prophets' 'revolutionary' texts. It is possible, of course, that it was a slant which the post-exilic redactors sought to cast on these traditional texts with an eye

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<sup>1242</sup> e.g. Is 40.1-2; 43.1, 18.

<sup>1243</sup> Davis, *In Search*, p. 42. See also Thompson: 'A central goal in creating the book of Isaiah was to unite the songs of doom and divine anger with the song of mercy and comfort that the collection, opening with Isaiah 40, presents.' *Bible*, p. 60. No sign of forgiveness here either.

<sup>1244</sup> Is 43.25.

<sup>1245</sup> 'Historically, deportations are intended to destroy nationality, while the biblical 'exile' is a means of preserving it.' Davies, *In Search* p. 42.

<sup>1246</sup> For forgiveness as a life-giving action, see Jesus' parable of the prodigal son [Lk 15.11].

<sup>1247</sup> A generations issue whereby children are relieved of the consequences of the sins of their fathers does, of course, appear in Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the proverbial metaphore of the sour grapes which the fathers eat, setting the children's teeth on edge (Jer 31.29, Ezek 18.2). However, this figure of speech is not used to indicate a concession allowing for the imergence of a new Israel from out of the old. Rather it is used to show that Israel (not 'a new Israel' of which these prophets know nothing) has now been given a second chance with the slate wiped clean.

<sup>1248</sup> i.e. through their seed.

to their own interests (though I remain to be convinced on this score) but there is certainly no evidence that it had a place in the original construction of the prophetic works. The truth is that though it is difficult – not to say impossible – to make the prophetic texts square with this pattern of 'continuity within discontinuity' which the minimalists claim for the post-exilic writers, it is easy to make them fit, like a glove, with the Yahwist's 'revolution'/revisionism pattern. According to the prophet Amos destruction and exile was to be Israel's punishment for revisionism. She was simply going to be abandoned as a useless tool (Jesus' savourless salt). Later prophets saw the exile basically in the same way, though more positively. For them it was the way in which the community would be purified by suffering, then forgiven and offered a second chance. The minimalists, of course, make nothing of this idea of a second chance. I *think* I find it in the texts but maybe without realising it I have simply made it up? Sometimes on reading what the minimalists have to say about the Bible I wonder if I have been studying the same book!

*The 'exile' pattern of continuity within discontinuity in specific biblical texts.*

So much for the actual pattern which the minimalists believe governs the way in which, in the main, Old Testament texts function. We now turn to examine the sense which, according to the minimalists, this pattern bestows on the individual stories. This, along with my accompanying criticisms, should give the reader a much closer perspective from which to judge between myself and my adversaries.<sup>1249</sup> In this section we will be dealing largely with the work of Thomas Thompson since, of all the minimalists, he provides the most detailed and widespread analysis of the biblical stories.

As one of the founder members of the movement Thompson associates himself with the minimalists' cause by sounding all the right bells. He claims that 'exile' is the governing pattern in the biblical texts,<sup>1250</sup> that it was created by post-exilic leaders of the community (my 'P and his friends') for their own reading,<sup>1251</sup> that it is a pattern which implies a discontinuity between new and old Israel,<sup>1252</sup> that it creates a mythical

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<sup>1249</sup> I call the minimalists adversaries because I see us as being involved together in ideological struggle over these texts and not simply in scholarly debate. It would, of course, be nice if we could together arrive at the truth through nothing more than objective analysis, but this is an illusion I don't share. The 'revolutionary' biblical tradition itself claims that a person arrives at the truth by obedience - not the blind obedience to the letter of the Law as advocated by P and his friends, of course, but obedience to the Law's spirit which demands radical solidarity (love your neighbour as yourself) and a movement of the feet.

<sup>1250</sup> 'It is in the exile theme of wandering, of obedient following wherever God might lead that we find the dominant motif of the larger chain-narrative of Genesis to II Kings.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 24.

<sup>1251</sup> 'When we now turn to answer the question about the audience for such reiterative echoes of the metaphors of the desert, purification and new ' beginnings, which we hear whenever we open the Bible, there is little need to guess. The literature itself has created clear expectations. When we ask for whom the Bible was written, it is hardly a particular historical event that confronts us. It is the historical context of an intellectual world of piety and philosophy that sees itself in terms of a very emphatic construct. I would describe this as a learned world of discourse and commentary, centred in a philosophical discussion about tradition. The world-view is sectarian in its structure. It is created by those who understand themselves as seekers after truth. It is critical thought: distinguishing the opinion of fools from sound reflection, understanding and wisdom.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 42.

<sup>1252</sup> 'These stories of polarity and conflict in the biblical origins traditions about old Israel ... are merely illustrations of what is for the tradition a transcendent conflict between good and evil. The ultimate conflict, reiterated through all of the struggles of this traditional past, involves a divine search

past<sup>1253</sup> out of traditional material which in itself may be very old,<sup>1254</sup> but that this is not done in order to preserve these traditions but rather to justify an understanding of the present which is shared by the author and his readers.<sup>1255</sup>

Since we will inevitably find ourselves dealing with the crucial God-Man relationship in all of these stories it will be best if we first find out how Thompson understands this concept. I myself have argued that in all ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Bible, a community's god represents its ideology, not simply its religion. Thompson makes a very similar point:

When Exodus 19 states that Israel was Yahweh's people and Yahweh Israel's God, it reflects a way of looking at the world that was very common in antiquity. A similar theme is expressed in the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, which views the world as divided among gods and nations. This song presents Israel as Yahweh's inheritance. When the world was created there were different peoples. Each had its own language and each its own form of religious expression. The relationship that was described between gods and lands was a rational reflection on international politics. The story structures of religious thought understood the world of the divine and the world of peoples as mirror reflections of each other. The god of a nation protects it, provides for its people and determines the destiny of its political life. The fate of a God in such a world of story was inextricably linked to the fate of his people. Through obedience to the law given by God, to one's king understood as a servant of God, and to one's traditions understood as established by God, a person fulfils conditions of piety. If gods acted in the world, provided and cared for their peoples and assured their survival and destiny, one required a divine world that was just as complex as the political world. The metaphors of a people chosen by their God, and of a people as being the possession of their God, existed long before the Bible. Long before they were taken up in the stories about old Israel, such metaphors were common throughout the entire ancient Near East. These motifs about gods were central in the development of the divine as personal and as caring. An understanding of one's God as personal is the very essence of belief as a commitment. *Faith in the divine was expressed as in the role of a client to his patron, namely, with love and loyalty.* Within the West Semitic world of Syria and Palestine such an understanding was gradually integrated, beginning first in the Assyrian period, with the growing dominance of a more inclusive understanding of the divine as universal spirit.<sup>1256</sup>

There is, however, one thing here that I have to object to. In slipping in that bit at the end, which I have italicised, about the God-Man relationship being expressed as the love and loyalty of a client to his/her patron Thompson seeks to give the impression that centrarchal thinking was *universal* in the ancient Near East. In this way, before he even starts analysing the stories themselves, he cleverly excludes without a word of

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for a people, for those who reject the 'way of men' and, unlike old Israel, unlike Samaria and the Jerusalem of the past, commit themselves to the values of the true Israel of the torah.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 30

<sup>1253</sup> '... evidence from extra-biblical texts which proves that some of the biblical narratives do derive from very early sources does not confirm the historicity of these stories. Quite the contrary. it confirms the Bible's own presentation of them as fictive tales of the past.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 14.

<sup>1254</sup> '... the Balaam story of Numbers ... gives us evidence that the Bible collects and re-uses very old tales from Palestine's past.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 14.

<sup>1255</sup> 'The 'exile' - that event of the past in which Israel was carried off from its homeland first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians - plays a central role in the formation of the Bible's tradition. However, the importance of the exile in the Bible is hardly that of the historical events that overwhelmed the populations of ancient Samaria or Jerusalem during the Iron Age. Rather it is a metaphor for the psychological events from which new beginnings are launched.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 31.

<sup>1256</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 92.

justification all possibility of identifying 'revolutionary' thinking within them! I am therefore obliged to point out that all the evidence suggests that though centrarchical thinking was indeed a product of civilization the mythological superstructure in itself was not. Consequently, mythological language, which certainly was universally employed throughout the ancient Near East, could presumably have been used to express *any* conceivable ideological position. This would suggest that whereas civilization-peoples, given their common centrarchical ideology, would quite naturally have expressed this God-Man relationship in the 'normal' client-patron terms, people living in a 'revolutionary' community (did such a thing ever exist) would probably not have. I say 'probably' because, of course, all revolutionary communities are obliged to struggle against the dominant civilization-language in vogue in order to create a new language to express their contrary interests and, in doing so, are only more or less successful.

#### 1. Thompson on the Adam and Eve story

In Chapter 9 I drew attention to the important ideological difference that I find lying between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3. On the one hand I see Genesis 1 as portraying Yahweh as a metacosmic god of transcendence and dominance who places Man in hierarchical charge of the universe. On the other hand I see Genesis 2-3 as portraying a very different, metacosmic god who is characteristically immanent and who creates Man to live, like all the other animals, according to his creaturely nature, satisfying his needs by tilling the ground and making it fruitful. I further pointed out that literary criticism's identification of the two sources P and J strongly suggests that some priestly administrator in the post-exilic period had created Genesis 1 as a prologue to Genesis 2-3 in order to make the latter safe by bridling its 'revolutionary' ideology, thus avoiding the need of getting rid of its unmistakably powerful ideas altogether. I then went on to use this understanding to show that the writer responsible for Genesis 2-3 had written his text against the Mesopotamian Adapa myth (which, like Genesis 1, sees Man<sup>1257</sup> as having authority over creation) so as to set out his alternative 'god of the marginals' thesis. In this, Man is seen as different from the other animals in that He has acquired (in the myth's terms *chosen to acquire*) consciousness which, on its up side, opens up enormous possibilities but, on its down side, makes Man embarrassingly aware of His sexuality, of His mortality and, most importantly, of the questionability of His conduct. This is especially so as regards His natural, though ideologically unjustifiable, propensity to give Himself status over others and to trash those who get in His way. Now let us see what Thompson makes of this scenario.

Using P and his friends' 'exile' spectacles Thompson broadly interprets the garden myth as offering a picture of a world in conflict with the transcendent, creator God. Here people are seen as nonentities, slaves,<sup>1258</sup> foolishly intent on doing their own will rather than their patron's (viz. eating the forbidden fruit). Because of this they are naturally alienated (viz. the three curses against Adam, Eve and the serpent),<sup>1259</sup>

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<sup>1257</sup> My capitals are in deference to the gender problem.

<sup>1258</sup> '... in the garden story, the people are nothing: slaves.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 93.

<sup>1259</sup> 'Now the deity turns to establish the destinies of the three conspirators with his curses. As in the tower of Babel story, he alienates those who once cooperated with each other: there, alienation is the fate of our languages; here, it lies in our hatred, our sex and our humanity....'<sup>T</sup> Thompson. *Bible*, p. 87.

excluded from the path of life and from the possibility of living happily as Yahweh's servants (viz. the expulsion from the garden containing the tree of life),<sup>1260</sup> and condemned to die (viz. the death sentence 'If you eat the fruit you shall surely die'). For Thompson, therefore, the story along with the others in Genesis 1 to 11 - and indeed the whole Genesis to II Kings corpus - is clearly seen as being about old Israel which, concerned to put its own will before that of God, was punished and removed in the exile, leaving space for a new Israel which would this time do the right thing by blindly obeying God's will, however foolish doing so might seem. There are numerous aspects of the way in which Thompson conducts his exegesis which show how strained this whole construction is. He recognises, for example, no ideological difference between Genesis I and Genesis 2-3. Consequently he implies, against the evidence, not only that the Yahweh of the Eden story is the same transcendent god of Genesis 1,<sup>1261</sup> but also claims that the human slaves of Genesis 1 – the exact equivalents of Adapa in the Mesopotamian story – are the same characters as the free human animals in Genesis 2-3.<sup>1262</sup> He also refuses to recognise the metacosmic nature of the god of the Adam and Eve story<sup>1263</sup> claiming, again against the evidence, that Yahweh made Adam his gardener because the garden, which he had just made, had *need of him*<sup>1264</sup> (thereby implying both that Yahweh *needed* a gardener and that Adam was give an hierarchical status as in Genesis 1). He also, at numerous points, smuggles into the text illicit readings claiming that these myths are similar to children's stories like C. S.

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<sup>1260</sup> 'The closure of the story extends the threefold alienation of human destiny. This is the death that humanity's independence has wrought: that impulse to do what is seen as good in one's own eyes, to be like God, to choose for oneself, to have knowledge oneself both of what is good and evil. That, the story tells us, excludes us from the garden of Yahweh, from the path of life, where we might be his servants and live.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 88.

<sup>1261</sup> Thompson vainly attempts to argue that myth-time and the transcendent are the same thing: '[The biblical authors'] stories take us, not back to the beginning of time, but to an imaginary time, a mythical time, before the world was the way it is. Such a time is enclosed within the transcendent space of a Narnia-like, legendary land of Qedem in which our world comes into contact with the transcendent. It is here that our world was born in story, and from Qedem that the narrative begins.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 83. In thus equating myth-time with the transcendent Thompson is, of course, pulling a fast one. For myth-time can just as easily involve immanent deities as transcendent ones. What is more, it can just as easily involve transcendent, cosmic deities, like in the Adapa myth, as a metacosmic, immanent deity, like in Genesis 2-3, or a transcendent metacosmic deity, like in Genesis 1. In short, Thompson is determined to find some way by fair means or foul to demonstrate that the god of Genesis 2-3 is transcendent, which he quite clearly is not. He is in our terms metacosmic, yes, but not transcendent. See Gen 2.7, 8, 15, 19, 21, 22; 3. 8, 21. See p. 242 above for a clarification of this distinction.

<sup>1262</sup> While it is certainly true to say that Adapa is described as a slave in the Mesopotamian myth, since he is created simply to do the work which the gods find irksome doing for themselves, I can identify nothing in Genesis 1 to suggest that the same thing is true of Adam and Eve. I say this because everything indicates that the god in Genesis 1 is not *only* transcendent (bossy) *but also* metacosmic and in being needless does not require slaves. However, since the god of Genesis 1 is clearly the *boss*, and since he clearly puts humans *in charge* of his creation I cannot actually exclude Thompson's thesis that the Adam and Eve of Genesis I are slaves after the manner of Adapa. However, I can say with absolute assurance that the Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3 are not properly to be called slaves because they are clearly described quite differently, as free animals designed to satisfy their own needs by making the earth fruitful.

<sup>1263</sup> He asserts, for example, that the Yahweh of Genesis and Numbers is a *lonely* god: 'the troubled interplay of this lonely god and this homeless people lies at the heart of the biblical story's plot. This is what I call the story of old Israel.' Thompson, *Bible* p. 6.

<sup>1264</sup> 'The reason [...] Yahweh first made the human being was to be his gardener; The garden had need of him.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 84.

Lewis' Narnia books,<sup>1265</sup> peopled by friendly, talking snakes, and full of humour and irony.<sup>1266</sup> All of this, I believe, is far from being the case.<sup>1267</sup> However the interesting thing is that, even taking such unjustified liberties with the text, Thompson still produces a reading containing a monumental flaw. For though he rightly rejects the classical idea that the Adam and Eve story is about original sin and a conflict between good and evil<sup>1268</sup> he none the less ends up with a very similar construct which inevitably comes to grief for similar reasons, as I will now explain.

In the past, scholarship argued that the Adam and Eve myth was about the fall. Because of this, scripture as a whole was seen as being all about rectifying this situation - either by redemption or through salvation history. However, the problem with such patterns was that they implied that God's curses could be removed and a way back to the garden found and both of these things are expressly forbidden by the myth itself. For a curse *imposed by God himself* is by definition something which cannot be undone and the way back to the garden is, as the story tells us, guarded by angels armed with swords who look in all directions at the same time. Furthermore, if any doubt still remained about the situation the Yahwist himself later informs us in no uncertain terms what happens to people who try, even if only inadvertently, to make the return passage to the garden.<sup>1269</sup> Thompson, following his minimalist 'exile' pattern, implies that *Adam's and Eve's exclusion from the garden signifies the exile of old Israel*. Symbolically the story's meaning is that old Israel is punished for refusing to blindly obey God's word. This being the case the post-exilic community's decision to envision itself as the new and faithful Israel returning to the land must be seen as implying that it was somehow possible to overcome the Genesis curses (at least those against Adam and Eve) and return to the garden situation, which means that we are back again with the old problem – that, according to the story, it can't be done.<sup>1270</sup> I find it inconceivable that someone would have dreamed up the Adam and Eve story to justify the idea that the returning 'exiles' were the new and faithful Israel since the story itself goes out of its way to exclude such a possibility. It is just conceivable, I suppose, that post-exilic writers, finding such a story in the tradition and, wanting to keep it, might have decided to put on it such a gloss *but this is not Thompson's argument*. His argument is that it was made up for such a purpose, which is surely out of the question.

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<sup>1265</sup> See note 1254 above.

<sup>1266</sup> 'The stories are humorous and ironic. They are presented in a stream of wordplay and puns.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 89. No one doubts that the stories are full of wordplay but this is no proof that they were ironic or playfully intended.

<sup>1267</sup> The idea that a snake could be used by people in a primitive society as a friendly creature even in a myth strikes me as wildly improbable. Indeed if we are capable of doing so in children's stories today it is surely partly in order to counteract the inherent fear we still have of these creatures in spite of our best efforts to free ourselves of it.

<sup>1268</sup> 'Although the garden or "paradise" story is often explained as a story of 'original sin' and a contest between evil and good, Satan and God, in fact it is not about these things at all. It is both more subtle and more fragile.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 85.

<sup>1269</sup> See Gen 13. 10-13.

<sup>1270</sup> Thompson himself seems to take on board the fact that curses endure forever and are not to be righted for he writes of the Genesis snake 'He is alienated forever - as real snakes are - from those he would befriend.' Though, of course, his idea that the Genesis snake was being friendly is simply the result of reading too many twentieth-century children's stories.

This business of an excluded return is not the only difficulty facing Thompson, for the truth is that to see the story of Adam and Eve in the minimalists' 'exile' way renders its meaning banal, as Thompson himself admits. He tells us that, according to the story, consciousness – that godly asset which was bought at such an exorbitant price – brings humans nothing more significant than a knowledge of their own nakedness i.e. their ignorance.<sup>1271</sup> He also tells us that according to the story – read in his own minimalist way – the solution of the problem which the arrival of consciousness creates in all of us is nothing more complicated than that we should all conduct our lives in blind obedience! Seeing the scriptures through the eyes of the post-exilic leaders Thompson sums up their achievement thus:

... they were good and skilful story-tellers. Their theology was adventurous and at times courageous, though their philosophy was unexceptional.<sup>1272</sup>

Notice that where 'P's and his friends' ideological achievement is safe from being unpacked in religion Thompson mildly lauds it, whereas where it is amenable to public inspection in philosophy (that is, as ideology) he unequivocally damns it.<sup>1273</sup> No wonder he feels it necessary to jazz up the myth by smuggling in all sorts of extraneous humour and irony for, otherwise, left in his hands it would be a very sad affair! Personally, I find it rather curious that he seems to want to turn such a powerful ideological story into something so incredibly drab and uninspiring.

## 2. Thompson on the Flood story

The abject quality of the Genesis stories, when seen in the light of the minimalists' 'exile' pattern, is well illustrated by Thompson's comments on the story of Noah and the Flood:

The Bible's creation stories ... centre themselves in the flood story. Foreshadowing the story of his own people, Israel, God is angry and regrets that he has made humanity. It was a mistake. He now sees them simply as evil, without any redeeming quality. He sends rain and floods to kill them all ... except Noah whom he likes, just as arbitrarily!<sup>1274</sup>

In the actual myth, as opposed to Thompson's exile-patterned distortion, there is, of course, nothing in the least bit arbitrary about Yahweh's decision to destroy mankind or to save Noah. For, according to the story as we have it in the Bible, while Noah was exonerated the rest of the world was found guilty of Category 1 sin, which, as I have shown in Chapter 9, is the trashing of fellow human beings as a result of a headlong

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<sup>1271</sup> 'The eyes of the woman and her husband are opened. They now possess wisdom and understanding. But what is that wisdom they now have? What is human knowledge and understanding? In answer, the story-teller offers us heavy-handed mockery. His summation of human wisdom is that great divine quality that distinguishes us from other animals – that, in the language of the Bible, makes us little lower than the angels. What is this wisdom? Nothing less than knowing we are naked! ... Having failed to understand the 'fear of God' (namely, discernment and understanding), [Adam and Eve] live out the added irony of fearing the knowledge of their nakedness; that is – from a philosopher's perspective – the knowledge of their own ignorance. This is the essence of the biblical wisdom tradition's 'fear of God!' Thompson, *Bible*, pp. 86-7.

<sup>1272</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 83.

<sup>1273</sup> It is noticeable that Thompson never divulges what this courageous and adventurous theology consists of. It was, of course, as I have already noted, the metacosmic god; the only trace left of the god of the marginals after P and his friends had removed him from the picture.

<sup>1274</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 93.

pursuit of personal enjoyment and creativity. This is made clear by the Yahwist's use of the sex-marker<sup>1275</sup> and the only thing which in the light of common human experience could throw doubt on his proposal is the fact that Yahweh was able to find one family that was guiltless. However, though there is nothing at all arbitrary in the Yahwist's story Thompson is perfectly right to point out that there was something distinctly arbitrary and indeed shabby in the post-exilic doctrine of election, where new Israel is chosen and everyone else condemned. What I can't understand is Thompson's crusade to ruin the rest of the Bible by cloaking it with this post-exilic distortion.

### 3. Thompson on the Tower of Babel story

You have to feel some sympathy for Thompson for he is caught up in a situation in which he has to find some plausible way of making every story in the Old Testament echo this miserable 'exile' pattern (some way of making a living!). This is not such a tall order where the stories are substantial and come widely separated. But here in the first few chapters of Genesis he is presented with five different stories each of which has to be fitted in some way into the mindless, blind-obedience post-exilic scheme. This multiplicity of stories, you will remember, was what caused Von Rad's downfall. He had given himself the equally impossible task of fitting them all into the pattern of the fall. He tried to do this by seeing them in terms of 'a growing avalanche of sin'.<sup>1276</sup> The trouble was that such a structure is clearly not to be found in the actual texts, as minimalists like Thompson are not backward in pointing out.

The interesting thing is that you do not experience the same problem when employing the god-of-the-marginals pattern, for the Yahwist uses the sex-marker technique to make it clear that his stories explore quite different situations. Thus, in the Adam and Eve myth he uses the sex-marker to show that here he is examining the phenomenon of ideological awareness which results from the development (in his terms 'choice') of human consciousness. Then in the Cain and Abel story he uses the surprising absence of the sex marker to show that here he is examining the phenomenon of non-ideological sin, which is to say the kind of sin which though perfectly forgivable civilization finds it cannot forgive, thus creating the phenomenon of marginalisation. In the story of the flood the Yahwist uses the sex-marker to indicate that this time he is examining ideological sin itself which he finds universally present. Again, in the story of Noah and his sons he uses the sex marker, along with corporate personality, to show that the surrounding nations should not all be seen in the same light since some of them are to be identified as Israel's ideological enemies and others as her ideological friends. Finally, in the story of the tower of Babel the Yahwist uses the absence of the sex marker to show that here he is discussing the inordinate power of civilisation which is experienced as quite terrifying by the excluded: the point of the story being that such a power is best seen as subject to its own internal contradictions. On the other hand Thompson's way of dealing with this problem of a multiplicity of stories is to link them all vaguely by means of an 'exile' theme of wandering and obedient following. It is in the exile theme of wandering, of obediently following wherever God might lead that we find the dominant motif of the larger chain-narrative of Genesis to II Kings.

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<sup>1275</sup> Gen 6. 2.

<sup>1276</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 108, 117.



This has drawn its plot from Israel's journeys, beginning already with the stories of Adam, of Cain and of the tower of Babel, in which the whole of mankind comes from the mythical land of Qedem (literally, 'the East') from which human life as we know it first begins.

Quite how Thompson fits *any*, let alone *all*, of these stories in Genesis 2 - 11 into this 'wandering obedience' pattern beats me. There are certainly 'exits' described in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, Noah and Babel and there are, I suppose, 'wanderings' of a sort described in the stories of Cain and Noah. However, the idea of the wandering of an *exile* (which implies a possible return) can only be described as apposite in the Noah story since he and his family are certainly pictured as returning to dry land! That said, it seems to me that the idea of obedience has no place in *any* of the Genesis stories.<sup>1277</sup> If this looks bad for Thompson's thesis things are, if anything, worse in the Babel story since here the episode gives every appearance of being about foreigners. Thompson seems to admit this when viewing the Genesis - II Kings complex as purposefully sandwiched between two Babylon stories - 1) the tower of Babel and 2) the exile of the people of Judah to Babylon following the fall of Jerusalem:

This mainstream story of human ambition, beginning with Babylon and coming back to Babylon, which now dominates the biblical tradition, is one focused on the competing wills of God and men.<sup>1278</sup>

That Babel signifies Babylon is a problem for Thompson's thesis since his 'exile' pattern is about old Israel and new Israel and there is nothing whatsoever about Israel here at all. But such a consideration does not deter him since he is perfectly capable of reading Babel as Jerusalem if it is necessary in order to force the story into his exile pattern:

The author, with his Babylonian mirror of Jerusalem, and with his tower hardly veiling David's Zion of legendary fame, offers us a world in conflict with God, where people do their own will, and make a world that they see as good.<sup>1279</sup>

In fact, of course, there is nothing in the Babel story about a conflict any more than there is about Jerusalem. All that is spoken of is an exuberant creativity which risks rivalling that of God. But when it comes to fitting a story into his 'exile' pattern that is a minor consideration for Thompson:

The moral of this whole story from Genesis I-11 is about conflict and alienation.<sup>1280</sup>

But there is nothing in the Babel story *either* about a conflict with God *or* an alienation of the inhabitants of the city. All there is mention of is a project which had to be abandoned, causing the people to disperse:

The Tower of Babel story of Genesis 11 bears implicit echoes of the tales of destruction and exile reiterated in the narratives to come, of divine wrath against the implicitly mirrored cities of Sodom, Samaria and Jerusalem.<sup>1281</sup>

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<sup>1277</sup> It is sometimes argued that Noah was obedient but would you hesitate for a moment if you were privately told by God that he was about to flood the earth?

<sup>1278</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 24.

<sup>1279</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 89.

<sup>1280</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 89.

<sup>1281</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 25.

Where does Thompson find anything about God's wrath or the destruction of the city in the Babel episode? You have to give it to him. He never lets a little thing like the actual terms of the story interfere with his 'exile' project!

Once again the problems for Thompson are not simply confined to the business of fitting the story into his 'exile' pattern for there is also the little problem of the sense the story makes when functioning within this pattern. The truth is that Thompson can do nothing about this since his 'exile' pattern dictates that all the stories in the Bible must basically mean pretty much the same thing, which is possibly the reason why he chooses only to comment on three out of the five stories in Genesis 2-11. For every leaving has to be seen as an exile, every journey as a wandering; every dealing with God an act of obedience except of course when it is an act of disobedience, and so it goes on. Decidedly, Thompson wallows not just in the mindlessness of the 'exile' motif of blindly obeying a transcendent God but also in the numbing repetitiveness of viewing every story in the same authoritarian way!

#### 4. Thompson on the Jacob and Esau story

Just as Thompson uses the garden of Eden and Babel stories to summarise the first series in Genesis 2-11 so he also uses the Jacob and Esau story to summarize the second series, in Genesis 12-35. You will remember that I, for my part, saw these stories patterned as a sort of survey of Israel's ideological relationships with the surrounding geographic communities, dictated by her covenant commitment to the god of the marginals. Let us now see what he makes of them.

Thompson, as always, ignores this underlying god-of-the-marginals ideological scenario. He sees these stories simply geographically, in terms of a competition for land:

It is a theme of Palestinian folklore that is used in the Abraham stories to introduce the dominant *topos* of the rejected first-born, as successively Palestine's Isaac is chosen over Arabia's Ishmael, Israel's Jacob over the Edomite Esau, and finally in the Joseph story, Samaria's Ephraim is chosen to dominate the highlands of Manassah.<sup>1282</sup>

He explains that this competitive aspect begins mildly in the story of Abraham and Lot but rises steadily to a crescendo in the Jacob and Esau tale. However, he points out that this theme is not triumphalist but rather supersessionist.<sup>1283</sup> This is an interesting choice of word because in Thompson's vocabulary the expression supersession indicates the old Israel/new Israel 'exile' theme where the relationship is between succeeding generations, the one superseding the other. I can certainly see that a new Israel could be said to supersede an old Israel but I don't quite know in what way Israel could meaningfully be said to supersede Edom. It is true, of course, that there is a sort of supersession in the actual stories since it is always the younger son who inherits. I, of course, have understood this phenomenon ideologically as the marginal dynastic principle which the biblical writers used repeatedly to reinforce the understanding that Israel is a community wedded to the god of the marginals. For Thompson who is blind

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<sup>1282</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 26.

<sup>1283</sup> 'The story-line, however, is hardly triumphalist but ironic and supersessionist: Israel's origin lies in been chosen against all expectation to be Yahweh's first-born and to receive the divine inheritance ... '

to the god-of-the-marginals the inheriting younger son is all about exilic supersession in which new Israel supposedly takes old Israel's place. However, the fact that such a reading makes complete nonsense of a text dealing with Israel and Edom (In what way can Israel be seen as taking Edom's place, whatever that was?) must surely indicate that he has got it wrong. How then is he to legitimately introduce the old Israel/new Israel supersession idea? Well, he attempts to do so by using the fact that both Abraham and Jacob are given changes of name in the stories.

Like Abraham before him, [Jacob] is renamed, and both names, the old and the new, Jacob and Israel, function as 'cue names', representing old and new Israel.<sup>1284</sup>

This is indeed the key to Thompson's understanding of the whole Jacob and Esau story. The critical moment comes at the crossing of the river Jabbok where Jacob wrestles all night with a demon (clearly representing God) and in prevailing is granted a new name: Israel. For Thompson, the story up to this moment has been about a scheming Jacob who lives in fear of the brother from whom he stole both a birthright and a blessing:

Prior to the visit of the night demon, Jacob dreaded meeting his brother and was in fear of his life. Now, however, they meet in peace and mutual recognition. It is no longer the scheming Jacob but now a 'just' Israel who meets his brother across the Jabbok. Esau is at peace in his Edom as Israel is in Shechem ...<sup>1285</sup>

It is now clear what Thompson's 'exile' reading of the text entails. Like a coming or a going so too a crossing of a river or change of name is to be seen as a representation of radical discontinuity: a rejection of the old and an embracing of the new.

At first sight it might appear that in this particular case Thompson's pattern holds good. Certainly the change in name and the crossing of the river both take place together at this critical juncture in the story. However, reading on I begin to have my doubts. Thompson maintains the writer describes that Jacob (now named Israel) crosses the river to meet his brother as a new man: 'no longer the scheming Jacob but now a "just" Israel'. But is it true to say that the writer presents us with a sort of Jekyll and Hyde change of personality which can properly be seen as representing a generational switch between old, faithless Israel and new, faithful Israel? This is how the story continues:

And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. And he put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.<sup>1286</sup>

This is certainly a great bit of writing, holding the tension right up to the last moment when it is suddenly broken not by Jacob but by Esau in a wonderful show of what looks at first sight like the forgiveness which Jesus portrayed in his parable of the prodigal son. However, I fail to see how the story itself can be understood in terms of supersession, where Jacob and Israel have to be seen as representing *different generations*, albeit operating within the same historical community. It certainly could be said that in the story Jacob operates in some sense as a changed man in that he

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<sup>1284</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 27.

<sup>1285</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 27-8.

<sup>1286</sup> Gen 33. 1-4.

demonstrates a new desire to appease his brother and it could be said that this behaviour called forth something like forgiveness from Esau. But such a transformation only makes sense if Jacob and Israel are seen as *the same individual representing the same community*, the one being the other somehow saved and restored. Furthermore such a transformation cannot properly be attributed to the efforts of one party alone (i.e. to a new Israel who, through struggle, manages to supersede old Israel) but demands quite as high a contribution from Esau/Edom, ‘the forgiver’, as from Jacob/Israel, ‘the forgiven’.

The fact is of course that Thompson ignores what I have so far labelled ‘the forgiveness’ aspect. For in his understanding the story functions magically rather than empirically. As he sees it salvation is described as coming not because Jacob shows signs of wanting to appease his brother, behaviour which Esau rewards by offering forgiveness, but rather because Jacob through struggle learns to obey God blindly, behaviour which God rewards by miraculously ordaining a happy turn of events:

In the closing scene of Jacob’s career as trickster, Jacob struggles with a night demon on the banks of the river Jabbok. Fighting him to a draw, Jacob forces the deity to give him a blessing before freeing him from the threatening dawn. God, accordingly, changes Jacob’s name to Israel, ‘because you have struggled with both God and men’. While this powerful naming story has the task of identifying Israel’s essence and establishing its destiny as a new nation of righteousness through struggle ‘with both God and men’, it also plays a role within the Jacob and Esau story. With this wrestling scene, Jacob’s relationship to Esau has been transformed.<sup>1287</sup>

So the disagreement standing between Thompson and myself has to be decided by whether or not this aspect which I have provisionally labelled ‘forgiveness’ is seen as a crucial factor. If, like me, the reader judges that it is, then Thompson’s ‘exilic’ reading has to be pronounced wrong. First because in such a reading Israel represents the returning exiles who, being righteous, need no forgiveness – they, after all, were not the ones who wronged Edom – and second because in such a reading salvation comes about miraculously as a reward for blind obedience and not as a result of Israel’s and Edom’s joint efforts to make things up between them.

Now it has to be admitted that a comparison of the Jacob and Esau story with Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son highlights the fact that Jacob does not in fact demonstrate contrition. So whilst Esau’s willingness, as it were, to ‘forgive’ is not in question Jacob’s remorse certainly is. Does this realisation damage my case? It would if my contention had been that the Yahwist’s Jacob and Esau story was all about contrition and forgiveness. However, I have never tried to argue such a point! Israel’s contrition and forgiveness after all is, as I have previously explained, a prophetic theme having to do with the exilic or post-exilic idea that Jerusalem had been destroyed and her leaders exiled because the community as a whole had failed to perform its allotted task of demonstrating radical solidarity. As such, forgiveness has to be seen as a preoccupation which only arose in the exilic or post-exilic period. You would not therefore expect to find it figuring in one of the Yahwist’s stories which, in my view at least, have to do with the ideological problems Israel, as a god-of-the-marginals community, faced when dealing with her near-eastern neighbours in earlier pre-exilic times.

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<sup>1287</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 27.

As I see it the Yahwist is not concerned to portray Jacob as a prodigal who has offended against his brother and so stands in need of his forgiveness. He talks about Israel and Edom as twin brothers, thereby showing that he sees them to all intents and purposes as culturally and ideologically indistinguishable. The problem Israel has with Edom is not therefore that she has to disarm Edom by shaming her – as was the case with Egypt and Philistia. Nor is it that she has to avoid ideological contamination in her dealings with Edom – as was the case in Israel's dealings with Moab, Ammon and especially the Canaanites. Her problem with Edom was simply that in her eyes only one community could be the god-of-the marginal's standard-bearer and that in desperately wanting the honour for herself she had effectively deprived the Edomites of something inestimably valuable, deeply offending them and giving herself a guilty conscience. In short, this story of Jacob and Esau deals with the thorny problem of election and the resolution the Yahwist enjoins is that salvation will only come about when Israel makes a considerable effort to appease Edom and Edom, by digging deep, manages to find it within herself to forgive ... if that is the right word.

I can't help noting that viewing the story in this light reveals it as being a remarkably fine expression of a genuine political problem and the appropriate way to go about dealing with it. In contrast I can't help likewise noting that Thompson's way of viewing the same story, as teaching that the transcendent and unknowable God will reward those who blindly obey him by magically ordaining for them happy outcomes reduces it to a complicated heap of mindless drivel. I leave readers to draw their own conclusions.

It is almost as if Thompson is aware that he has not quite managed to pull things off for he has another desperate attempt at driving home his supersessionist point:

The transformation motif of this tale's climax is revisited in the interpretive song of Deuteronomy 33, which Moses sings just before he dies. This commentary links the story of Israel's wilderness wandering with the conflict story of Jacob and Esau, and marks that story too as a story of supersession: the new surpassing the old.<sup>1288</sup>

So Deuteronomy 33 is a song which links Israel's wilderness wanderings with the conflict story of Jacob and Esau, thereby itself becoming a story of supersession, is it? Let's take a look at the text in Thompson's own translation:

Yahweh comes from Sinai; he rises from Se'ir, he shines from Paran's mountain.<sup>1289</sup> 'You are from the army of gods.' On his right hand is strength, yet he loves all peoples. The holy ones are in his power. 'They sit at your feet: they listen to your command.' The law which Moses gave us belongs to the gathering of Jacob, that there be a king (namely, Yahweh) in Yeshurun to gather the leaders of the people, the assembly of the tribes of Israel.<sup>1290</sup>

I certainly see the name Jacob here but no reference to the Jacob/Esau story. Indeed it is abundantly clear that the Deuteronomist is *not* referring to a story in which Jacob is given a new name to distinguish new from old Israel, as Thompson suggests, for he later uses the two names to mean the very same community:

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<sup>1288</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 28.

<sup>1289</sup> Thompson notes that Yahweh is here identified as a god from the lands of Sinai and Se'ir, a god from Edom's mountains.

<sup>1290</sup> Deut 33. 2-5.

They shall teach Jacob thy ordinances:  
and Israel thy law.<sup>1291</sup>

But Thomson is determined to make his supersession point, for he continues:

[In Deuteronomy] The tribes assemble on the borders of the promised land, ready to leave the wilderness and cross the Jordan with Joshua. Like Jacob before them, they are on their journey to Shechem. They have set out to meet once again in Joshua 24. Shechem the forerunner of Samaria with its temple on Mount Gerizim, is where Yahweh is Israel's king, where his law and torah is to be its wealth. In Deuteronomy's interpretation, the story of Jacob's supplanting Esau leaves the realm of ethnographic commentary and becomes religious story.

But this whole thing is pure invention. It is surely as nonsensical to suggest that here Deuteronomy interprets the story of Jacob and Esau as it is to suggest that the change in Jacob's name signifies a supersession of old Israel by new Israel. Does Thompson want us to see Abram's change of name to Abraham in the same way?<sup>1292</sup> The whole thing is not just a fabrication but also an exercise in rubbishing the text or so it seems to me.

#### 5. Thompson on the Moses story

Unlike Coats, Thompson freely admits that Moses is portrayed as an unheroic figure in the Exodus stories.<sup>1293</sup> However, he sees this simply as a tactic employed by the writer to emphasize the transcendent nature of God as the one who commands blind obedience:

Yahweh chooses an entirely unpromising fellow to be [the Israelites'] leader. This odd choice of Moses is not quite as arbitrary as had been his choice of Noah. Moses is chosen with irony in mind: because he is unheroic. Not a single line of the narrator's pen sketches a heroic man. Moses has none of the stuff of greatness or leadership in him. His inabilities make it very clear to the audience that God is the one in charge here. This god wants to be treated like God; that is, the ultimate patron of his people. He wants to decide things, and he wants his people above all to follow and obey *him*. He demands very little of this nation ... only that they follow him wherever he should take them, and that they obey him.<sup>1294</sup>

Reading this makes me realize that I must have been labouring all these years under a misapprehension for I have always believed that Moses was the greatest figure in Jewish tradition and that Yahweh was a god who made all other deities look puny by comparison. Here, however, Thompson presents the pair of them as a sort of Laurel and Hardy duo, making it difficult to determine which is the most ridiculous. While I can certainly see that Thompson finds it necessary to make such an argument, given the absurd position he has got himself into with his 'exile' pattern in which every biblical text has to be seen as countenancing the mindless authoritarian ideology of P and his friends, I find it difficult to imagine him doing so with a straight face. No wonder he has to resort to his usual tactic of claiming that the text is ironic,<sup>1295</sup> for the

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<sup>1291</sup> Deut 33. 10.

<sup>1292</sup> Gen 17.5.

<sup>1293</sup> See p. 125-127 above. This is a point on which I am in fundamental agreement with him, though we seriously part company regarding the explanation of this key feature of the text.

<sup>1294</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 93-4

<sup>1295</sup> Thompson finds irony in significant quantities in the following texts:

The Garden of Eden story	p. 86-7.
All of the stories in Genesis 2-11	p. 89.
The stories of Israelite prophets	p. 57.
The Moses story	p. 93.

great thing about such a form of expression is that it not only makes it possible to argue that black is white but also that it makes it impossible for anyone else to prove you wrong in so doing. As every reader of Thompson soon finds out, when it comes to biblical exegesis irony is in the eye of the beholder. Given such a situation it is my conviction that *irony should never be resorted to in an argument about the meaning of a text*. It only has a legitimate place there where it stares *everyone* in the face: as for example in the story of Jonah and the Whale.

#### 6. Thompson on the spies story

The story of the spies set out in Numbers 13-14 is recapitulated in Deuteronomy 1. Here is an outline of the plot. Having escaped from Egypt the Israelites have arrived at their destination on the borders of the promised land. All that remains for them to gain their inheritance is to advance northward into the settled hill-country and take it from its unsuspecting inhabitants. They send spies to reconnoitre the territory but these return with mixed news. On the one hand the land clearly represents a rich prize. It is said to be flowing with milk and honey, producing clusters of grapes so huge that it takes two men to carry one of them suspended on a pole between them. On the other hand it is held by the Nephilim, a race of giants (described by the Yahwist in Genesis 6. 4) who are said to devour their own people and to be so huge that they make the Israelites look like grasshoppers. Most of the returning spies consider the situation hopeless. Only two of them, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people to go boldly ahead with the planned conquest, confident that with Yahweh on their side they can rest assured of victory. But the people suffer a loss of nerve and refuse to comply with Yahweh's orders to engage the enemy, while Moses demonstrates a conspicuous lack of leadership. For this 'iniquity' and 'wickedness' (the terms used by the text which indicate the severity of the condemnation as does the punishment<sup>1296</sup>) they are condemned never to set foot in the promised land but to wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years till they all die off. Only Joshua and Caleb will have the honour of leading a new generation into Canaan after the rest of their own generation have all gone.

Thompson finds himself in luck with this story for it seems at first sight to fit moderately well with the minimalists 'exile' pattern of discontinuity between a sinful older generation and an innocent younger generation. The only real problem is presented by Joshua and Caleb but Thompson cleverly manages to fit them into the pattern too by presenting them as 'the remnant', a word used by the classical prophets to indicate those who remain after Israel has been purified and refined by humiliation and suffering:

Yahweh punishes Israel for its disobedience. The whole generation will die in the desert. They are the lost generation, laying the foundations for stories of deportations yet to come. Joshua and Caleb are spared to serve as 'the remnant' who lead a 'new Israel' into the promised land.<sup>1297</sup>

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The Elijah story p. 58.  
The Jonah story p. 57.  
<sup>1296</sup> Numbers 14. 34-5.  
<sup>1297</sup> Thompson, Bible, p. 64.

This is an interesting suggestion. It is, of course, appropriate in some way to speak of Joshua and Caleb as constituting a *remnant* since *they will be all that remains of the fathers* after the forty years in the wilderness. This, however, is clearly *not* the way in which the prophetic writers used the term since they were certainly not implying that there would be one or two amongst those who had been taken into exile who would finally one day return. Indeed, the minimalists characteristically insist that in the case of the exile a remnant means a new and pure generation who might not even in fact be Israelites at all. But how can a new and pure generation constitute a remnant since, in being *new*, a generation cannot constitute something that *remains*? For the prophetic writers it was not because the returnees were a new, guiltless generation that they constituted a remnant, as the minimalists maintain. For them that would have been an absurd suggestion and, though the minimalists may gloss over such a point, we should not. For the prophets the returnees were a remnant *because they were part and parcel of the Israel which had sinned and had gone through the purifying suffering and thus been refined*. Talking about Joshua and Caleb, or indeed the new generation they led into the land of Canaan, as a remnant would have no meaning in the prophetic sense of a refined remainder for none of them had disobeyed, putting themselves in need of purification. So though Joshua and Caleb were remnants in one sense of the word, being the only fathers left standing, neither they nor the new generation could be said to be remnants in the prophetic sense. Once again we are faced with an 'exile' pattern that manifestly does not fit the texts,<sup>1298</sup> the inevitable conclusion being that the person who was responsible for creating (or recreating) the story of the spies was certainly not using this pattern as a guide. Of course this does not mean that P and his friends did not later *read* the story in the peculiar way Thompson outlines and add editorial touches along these lines. They may have done for all I know, though I am not myself persuaded of it, but if they did they were not themselves responsible for the story in the first place, as Thompson, in line with the minimalists' thesis, maintains.

However, this is not what strikes me most about Thompson's analysis. Thompson contrasts the story of the spies as it appears in the book of Numbers with the same story as it appears in Deuteronomy. He attempts to use this comparison to prove his general thesis that biblical stories were not designed as records of old Israel's past but rather as justifications for the existence and ideological stance of the new post-exilic community. He begins by making the point that it is only possible to have any real certainty about the intention of a biblical writer when it is clear that he or she is writing fiction.

Asking whether biblical narratives have other motives and purpose than historical ones is useful, but it only ... helps us with those narratives that are most clearly fictive.<sup>1299</sup>

I find this an interesting remark for if you take, on the one hand, the story of Jonah and the whale it certainly seems true to say that the realisation that this is a tall story makes it much easier to see that the author is criticising narrow-minded nationalism in Israel. On the other hand, if you take the story of Elijah it also seems true, at least to a limited extent, to say that the fact that this story looks like a straightforward historical account makes it less easy to be certain what the author is driving at beneath the surface since, as everyone knows, history is full of compromises and contradictions. Thompson uses

<sup>1298</sup> i.e. this story or the prophetic writings.

<sup>1299</sup> Thompson, Bible, p. 62.



this awareness to argue that if we only had the story of the spies as it appears in Deuteronomy we might have been fooled into thinking that it was a straightforward bit of historical recollection. However, the story as it appears in Numbers gives the lie to this, or so Thompson believes:

One of the Bible's most delightful and most implausible stories is that of the spies in Numbers 13-14. Its account is of a magic valley of giants, the grandeur and fantastic fertility of which is expressed by the motif of a land whose rivers flow with milk and honey. Certainly, this is the stuff of Homer's *Odyssey*. Most, I think, would agree that this tale is an implausible candidate for historicity. Far preferable would be our story's demythologized variant, which we can find when we turn to the first chapter in the Book of Deuteronomy. Yet, for all of Deuteronomy's greater realism, few exegetes would give this version preference over the preposterous tale in the Book of Numbers. Not only is Numbers' story more interesting as adventure tale, but it is linked, as we shall see when we return once again to this story, with Genesis 6: 4's mysterious Nephilim: the children resulting from sons of God marrying beautiful women.<sup>1300</sup>

Thompson's point here is that the mythical nature of the story of the spies as it appears in Numbers demonstrates that its author was not concerned to give an historical account of a past event and that Deuteronomy Chapter 1, as a demythologised version of the same story, must therefore be considered in the same light *even though it gives every appearance of being a straight historical account*. The question is does this argument hold?

One thing that immediately catches my attention is Thompson's contention that Deuteronomy 1 is a *demythologised* version of Numbers 13-14. The reader will be aware that in the case of the Genesis myths I have strenuously argued against the conviction, shared by most twentieth century scholars, that these myths show signs of demythologising. My argument has been that demythologising implies a change from a descriptive (i.e. poetic) to an analytic (i.e. scientific) approach and that though such a change can be detected in the coming of the enlightenment, making Bultmann's exercise in demythologising explicable, there is no sign of such a switch taking place between, say, Mesopotamian mythology and the mythology found in the Bible. Here in his comparison of Numbers and Deuteronomy Thompson claims to identify such a switch in linguistics and I am happy to agree with him. However, I have to point out that the switch occurs only on the mundane level and not on the ideological one. For whereas in the Genesis myths we were talking about the use of mythological language to describe the dealings between God and human beings, here in Numbers we are talking about the uses of mythological language to describe dealings which take place purely between humans. In other words what we have in Numbers is the sort of scenario I have previously described, where people talk to each other about a dangerous, nearby river, referring to it as a female spirit who entices unwary humans into her deathly embrace. This is simply a case of *choosing* to use strong poetic language to convey hard information about the environment. I emphasise that this was a choice since, although it would have been more difficult for people possessing a very limited vocabulary of abstractions to give the information straight, it would not have been an impossible exercise. Clearly the Deuteronomist, in recounting the spy story, seeks to impart the same information as the Yahwist about the feelings of certain bedraggled marginals on suddenly coming face to face with their civilisation-opponents, only this time avoiding poetic imagery by telling it straight. However, the

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<sup>1300</sup> Thompson, Bible, p. 39.

fact is that on the ideological level nothing ... but nothing ... has changed. On the ideological level there has been no demythologising for in Deuteronomy, quite as much as in Numbers, Yahweh remains omnipresent, speaking to people and directing events. It would seem therefore that on the ideological level there was no choice. The only alternative to expressing your ideological convictions by means of the language of myth was to choose to remain mute.

Given these clarifications let us now return to Thompson's argument. He claims that the use of mythological language in Numbers demonstrates that the intention of the author could not have been to describe some past event in old Israel's history.

It is ironic that it is the Book of Numbers' unbelievable, mythological variant of the tale, and not the more 'realistic' version in Deuteronomy that has provided biblical archaeological scholarship with a basis for calculating its 'historical' chronology for the exodus from Egypt as having been forty years earlier than Israel's entry into Palestine.<sup>1301</sup>

However, far from proving that the author of Numbers was writing fiction the Yahwist's poetic language strongly suggests to me that he was using traditional material in which the authentic marginal flavour of some historic event had been expertly preserved.<sup>1302</sup>

This would indicate that the Deuteronomist was probably writing later in a more sophisticated environment in which the Yahwist's 'mythical' turn of phrase appeared somewhat vulgar. What the Yahwist describes by means of this talk about Nephilim giants is not a good adventure story designed to 'strike vicarious terror' and 'transmit insight into transcendent reality', as Thompson rather desperately seeks to maintain.<sup>1303</sup>

It is rather that awe which even the broken-down civilisation-world, which had somehow managed to survive in the central Palestinian highlands during the late bronze to early iron-age, still managed to inspire in a group of frightened, malnourished and no doubt bedraggled and unwashed refugees escaping, maybe, from Egypt. To these miserable marginals the well-armed, well-fed, haughty, aristocratic *mariannu* warriors who rode about in war chariots policing these highland towns in Canaan must have indeed looked like giants who fed on their fellow countrymen and looked down on homeless outcasts like themselves as insects to be trodden on. All of Thomson's talk about *vicarious terror* and *transcendent realities* appears to me to be an evasion designed to miss the point. As I see it the Yahwist employs traditional 'mythological' language to communicate *the real terror* experienced by marginals when faced, once again, with *the hard reality of civilisation*. It was the marginals' foolish, though utterly understandable, *awe* of civilisation which the god-of-the-marginals ideology had been expressly designed to counter. It had been to combat this awe that Moses called on the people at the beginning of the 'revolution' to stand up for themselves in partnership with their god. And it was the inopportune return of this awe at this critical historical juncture

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<sup>1301</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 39.

<sup>1302</sup> Note that I am talking only about the *marginal flavour* of this event. I am not suggesting that the event described is historical.

<sup>1303</sup> 'What has been lost [in the Deuteronomy account] is the adventure, that insight into transcendent reality.' ... The original story of Numbers was intended to strike vicarious terror. How else evoke a responsive and courageous 'Nevertheless!' or 'Even so!' from this adventure's audience? How else, in fact, convince them that only God can save them in their history? The ethical demand of such a story is not bravery of any ordinary sort, such as that demanded of soldiers to fight against superior forces. That belongs to Deuteronomy's realism. Rather, God's command in the Numbers story is absolute: to do his will and not their own, He will have Israel fight against giants! Thompson, *Bible*, p. 64.

which led to such a devastating ideological condemnation and punitive consequences<sup>1304</sup> at least as the Yahwist tells the story.

#### 7. Thompson on the Elijah and Jonah stories

The Elijah story,<sup>1305</sup> and the Jonah story found in II Kings<sup>1306</sup> as well as in the work known by his name, are treated by Thompson in much the same way as the two versions of the spies story above. Here again, according to Thompson, in the Elijah story we are presented with a text which though it may look as if it might be historical cannot be so because of its similarity with the other text, the story of Jonah, which is clearly fictional.<sup>1307</sup> For Thompson this is clear proof that both of these stories are simply inventions and contain no historicity.

For Thompson the 'exile' pattern betrayed by these texts is to be seen in the ironic way in which the prophets were viewed by the post-exilic leadership. He tells us that for P and his friends the prophets were not, as might be thought, messengers of God - Yahweh's ideological servants. Rather they were catalysts for old Israel's faithlessness and betrayal:

... this ironic understanding of prophecy is central to the tradition's view of prophecy. Rather than playing the role of messengers of God's word in Israel's history, prophets have functioned as catalysts for old Israel's faithlessness and betrayal. Prophets harden hearts. They provoke stories of Israel's disobedience. They create rejection of the way of God's *torah*. As Isaiah has already stressed, the prophets present the proof that Israel neither knows nor understands anything.<sup>1308</sup>

So according to Thompson Israelite prophets are generally seen in the Bible, through the eyes of the post-exilic leaders who supposedly made up their stories, as standing not *with* old Israel but rather *against* her. Thompson suggests this is the reason why the Old Testament relates that the prophets were never listened to.<sup>1309</sup> Given this general scenario, what we see in these Elijah and Jonah stories, so Thompson tells us, are prophets of a completely different ilk, prophets who, on the contrary, are loyal, listened to, and ready to fight Israel's cause against her enemies.<sup>1310</sup> Thompson suggests that

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<sup>1304</sup> I am not, of course, suggesting that the forty years wandering in the wilderness is historical. I am simply suggesting that the tradition had preserved some memory of a devastating setback due to loss of nerve.

<sup>1305</sup> I Kings 18-19.

<sup>1306</sup> II Kings 14.23-27.

<sup>1307</sup> Thompson also maintains that the book of Kings as a whole clearly demonstrates a didactic rather than an historical function but this is a circular argument which we will not deign to follow: 'In dealing with the strongly interpretive narratives of Jonah and Elijah in II Kings, even a mere surface attribution of history to the book must be given up. It is not only that stories from II Kings are thrown into the role of ironic caricature by the book of Jonah, but the same kind of discourse within II Kings itself indicates that we are dealing with a didactic function, stories told for the purpose of teaching.' Thompson, *Bible* pp. 59-60. (Thompson here confuses I Kings with II Kings.)

<sup>1308</sup> Thompson, *Bible* p. 57.

<sup>1309</sup> 'Words such as irony and caricature are hardly foreign to discussions of the Book of Jonah, with its prophet playing the role of anti-prophet. He is the only one of all the biblical prophets – beginning already with Moses and the murmuring tradition of Exodus – whose prophecies were listened to!' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 57.

<sup>1310</sup> 'This [Jonah] is a prophet unlike others. He is not disloyal and unpatriotic like Jeremiah, nor does he oppose the great king Jeroboam, nor anyone who "walks in the ways of Jeroboam". He stands with not against Israel.' Thompson, *Bible*, 57.

these prophets were purposely created by their post-exilic authors as fall guys so that they could then be deconstructed by their creators with irony and humour.<sup>1311</sup> And what was the purpose of all this? Here is the answer in his own words:

The deconstructive theme [was] that God and his action in history are not what we expect. The central theme ... is [that] the will of God is not what men will have it. ... the good is what Yahweh sees to be good.<sup>1312</sup>

No one, of course, in their right mind would deny that the story of Jonah and the whale is a tall story and hence a deliberate invention; Thompson is perfectly aware of this. His problem is to convince us that the story of Elijah is a deliberate invention too. He seeks to do this by proving its similarity with the Jonah story. This is difficult to do since he himself admits that the Jonah story is an obvious spoof whereas the Elijah story looks like historiography to the ordinary reader. Given this situation, Thompson has to work hard to convince us that it is not in fact the case. He tries to do this, as usual, by showing us that the Elijah text is just as full of irony and humour as the story of Jonah:

I Kings 19 finds Elijah hunted by his enemies after the slaughter of Baal's prophets and running for his life. The scene unexpectedly turns comic. Once again we hear the rough humour of 11 Kings' implicit author, the same who had Elisha call on bears to eat the children who had called him 'baldy' (11 Kings 2: 23-24). In I Kings 19, the humour is deconstructive, turned against Elijah as prophet of doom. The aim is to mock the 'man of God' the author himself created. Even the tale's setting is made wry fun of. Elijah takes a day's journey out into the desert, only to sit under a tree. Again a joke: in fear for his life he prays to die. The humour is laconic. The story closes when Elijah falls asleep and, like Jesus in his turn, is saved by angels who minister to him in the desert.<sup>1313</sup>

Thompson is no fool. He knows perfectly well that his case at this point is remarkably weak for if the Elijah text was written as a spoof then it would not be necessary to explain the fact to us for, as everyone knows, jokes are specifically constructed in such a way as to need no explanation. He seeks to give himself at least a small chance of carrying things off by dealing with the Elijah story first. This means that he can in the next paragraph swiftly move on to Jonah and explain the joke there (where, of course, no explanation is needed) thus ending triumphantly on a strong point which he hopes his readers will retain:

The Jonah story takes up the comic line which I Kings had opened. Jonah too wishes to die, but he wishes to die because his preaching was successful. Jonah builds a shelter beyond the city (Elijah's desert) and waits to see what will happen. The humour of I Kings leaks into our Jonah story. Although Jonah is already sheltered from the heat of the sun, Yahweh causes a plant to grow up overnight to shade his head. Jonah is quite pleased by this. The next day, God causes a worm to kill the plant. He then increases the heat and the swelter to the point that Jonah wishes again for death: ....(and so on).<sup>1314</sup>

However, the fact is that Jonah does not 'take up a comic line opened by I Kings' nor does any humour in I Kings 'leak into the Jonah story' for I Kings does not have a comic line, and the Jonah story has no need of humours leaked in from elsewhere since it is already brim full of the stuff. All of this seems to me to be eyewash and we should not be taken in, for the simple truth is that the Elijah story, whether it be history or invention, is clearly presented as a deadly serious affair containing no hint of irony

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<sup>1311</sup> See story of Job below.

<sup>1312</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, 59.

<sup>1313</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, 58.

<sup>1314</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, 58.

except in I Kings 19.27 where humour is used by Elijah (not, as Thompson would have it, against him) in a manner which greatly enhances the deadly seriousness of the story. So much for Thompson's thesis that the Elijah story is, like Jonah and the whale, a bit of invented, humorous deconstruction.

We now turn to the question of the meaning of these texts when seen as post-exilic constructs. Thompson argues that as humorous deconstructions both stories teach the lesson that the will of the unknowable, transcendent God has to be blindly accepted without testing to see whether it makes any sense or not for human beings to do so. However, in the case of the Jonah story such a thesis is a complete non-starter. For this story is at pains to argue that Jonah must surely see that it is irrational to behave as if animals and people (albeit foreigners) do not matter. In other words, far from taking a point of view that Yahweh's will must be blindly obeyed this story actively seeks to show that Yahweh's will should be obeyed *because it is eminently reasonable*, a fact that has to be admitted even by a blind bigot like Jonah when he is cornered (though apparently not by Thompson himself).

In the case of Elijah Thompson argues that the story is a critique of those who justify violent conflict against Israel's enemies:

The critique is a critique of the tradition. All the expectations of the divine that Elijah and the prophets of doom and violent war embody are deconstructed in this little tale tucked away in the heart of a history that is so strongly marked by the acts of Yahweh, the true God of *heaven's* armies. It is, I think, the thematic centre of the Book of 11 Kings.<sup>1315</sup>

I find this statement unexceptional. As I see it the story certainly appears to target a mistaken attitude of some sort. However, I fail to see how Thompson makes its teaching against violence square with his thesis of a post-exilic ideology for he has never previously argued that P and his friends were opposed to violent measures being taken against Israel's internal or external enemies. If Thompson believes that the post-exilic leaders were pacifists of some description then he should say so and demonstrate how such an idea fits with an ideology of dominance such as theirs. My suspicion is that Thompson has something rather more subtle at the back of his mind, his belief being that P and his friends possibly objected to Elijah's violent conduct of *ideological* warfare but as I say I am only guessing. Whatever is the case, Thomson has conspicuously failed to show that this story reflects the 'exile' view of new Israel's leaders. That said, it is clearly evident that, understood as a criticism of Elijah for his violent campaign against the priests of Baal, the story couldn't be more at one with the god-of-the-marginals reactive strategy in which violence as a strategy of dominance is always criticised and pacific demonstration and exposure enjoined.<sup>1316</sup>

## 8. Lemche on the Elijah story

Given the central position of this Elijah story in the Hebrew 'revolutionary' tradition we will exceptionally allow the minimalists one more shot at showing how it can be

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<sup>1315</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 59.

<sup>1316</sup> It has to be remembered that rightly or wrongly the 'revolutionary' tradition did not view violence in the form of the ban or of the legitimate defence of the community from naked aggression as part and parcel of a strategy of aggression.

understood in their fashion. Niels Lemche reminds us that the biblical texts should not be understood as histories. However, he claims that all the evidence within them suggests that the god Yahweh, unknown in Palestine before the arrival of the Israelites, was associated with the Sinai peninsula.<sup>1317</sup> He believes that 'certain characteristics of the figure of Yahweh which have been held to reflect the original and most intimate aspects of him, such as his jealousy, his wrath, his hatred of other gods, and so forth, might be taken to indicate that he was regarded at an early point in time as a storm god<sup>1318</sup> and a war god.<sup>1319</sup> According to him this would suggest that this later Elijah story 'voices clear opposition to this understanding of the deity.' He concludes that 'one might say that a religion which described Yahweh as the god who brought water for the fields had no use for a Yahweh who 'strips the bark off the trees' (Ps. 29.9) and, likewise, that a religion which praised Yahweh as the maintainer of the cosmos did not require a Yahweh who manifested himself in an earthquake.' In this way Lemche too envisages the Elijah story as a critique of tradition, the rejection of a primitive tribal god in favour of a transcendent god of civilisation. I have to say that I find it difficult to be charitable in the face of such an exegesis. For not only does it totally disregard the central contrast which the story describes between strength and weakness (and which even Thompson for all his faults recognises) but it also turns a magnificently profound text concerning the Hebrew's reactive strategy into a wretched bit of civilisation-nonsense.

## 9. Thompson and the story of Job

According to Thompson the central theme of the book of Job is that 'the will of God is not what men will have it.'<sup>1320</sup> This is simply his way of saying that it is basically all about the great transcendent high god who is so far removed from human beings that he is *unknowable* and *unfathomable*. He claims the book contrasts 'knowledge of god' – human wisdom being faulty and only *known from hearing*<sup>1321</sup> – with 'the fear of god', which comes about as a result of the realisation by human beings of their ignorance and which the book describes in terms of *actually seeing*:

Biblical authors delight in drawing ironic conclusions about the quality of our ignorance on the basis of the limitations of our experience. ... Nowhere is this more emphatically realized than in the Book of Job's devastating critique of traditional knowledge about God. Job confronts Yahweh addressing him from the whirlwind: 'I had only heard of you as one hears with the ear, but now my eyes see you' (Job 42: 5).<sup>1322</sup>

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<sup>1317</sup> 'We must conclude that Yahweh was originally located in the Sinai Peninsula, and that he was 'brought' to Palestine sometime between the end of Late Bronze Age and the emergence of the Israelite monarchy. This, however, is all we can say with any degree of certainty.' Lemche, *Ancient*, p. 253.

<sup>1318</sup> '... it would not be unreasonable to suppose that a deity who was associated with thunder, lightning, and earthquakes [like Yahweh] was probably regarded as a *storm god*. In this connection it would be fitting to refer to the well-known West Asiatic storm god of many names as a parallel to the Yahweh we encounter in many of the oldest biblical sources. Yahweh may well have been the local manifestation of the storm god on Sinai and, later, in Palestine.' Lemche, *Ancient*, p. 254.

<sup>1319</sup> Lemche, *Ancient*, p. 255.

<sup>1320</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>1321</sup> 'Like Job's knowledge of Yahweh, we know of it only from hearing. Form and matter, the spiritual and the physical, reality and appearance develop a cosmic irony, frustrating the human ideals of understanding. Thompson, *Bible*, p. 16.

<sup>1322</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 16.

As such the book should be seen, so Thompson claims, as part and parcel of that critical movement, which he finds evidenced throughout the ancient world, in which the traditional gods were criticised, found wanting and then replaced by a transcendent high god.<sup>1323</sup> Thompson is at pains to point out that this fear of god, which is the beginning of wisdom (see Job 28. 28) is not to be confused with the terror of god which one finds in Job's nightmare of Yahweh roaring from his whirlwind. It is rather the beginning of wisdom that is righteousness and philosophy.<sup>1324</sup>

What interests me about all of this is the way in which Thompson reduces a magnificent work full of high drama and interest to something altogether static and of little consequence. It is not as if Thompson sees Job as a cocky know-all who over a process of time is forced to accept that in fact he knows nothing. That, at least, would have constituted a plot with some interest. What Thompson presents us with is a Job who both starts off by being sceptical and finishes in an identical position. For, according to him, all that is achieved by Yahweh in his speech from the whirlwind is a confirmation of what Job already knew: that as regards the basic injustice of his fate he was right and his colleagues wrong. I find this dumbing down of a high work of art an amazing feat though hardly one to be lauded.

Thompson's argument is that the book *defends* the post-exilic, transcendent-god ideology. In this Yahweh is seen as a distant high god whose rule has to be accepted blindly because, though his ordinances may appear to be entirely arbitrary and his fashion of rewarding and punishing unjust, this is simply due to the partialness and fallibility of the human perspective. But is this the case?

The one thing which is not in doubt is the fact that the book vindicates Job and finds his comforters wrong. Given this point of departure I can't help but note that it is not Job but his comforters who defend the transcendent-god thesis while Job, for his part, insists on pointing out that, given his personal circumstances, the transcendent god defence – that if we knew everything we would see that God's rule is just – simply holds no water. Job doesn't pretend that he is in the position of the high-god, knowing everything. He recognizes his ignorance. However, he claims that he knows enough to be certain that, at least in his own case, the transcendent-god defence, which his comforters persist in serving up, is bull-shit. He, therefore, in extremis finally summons up the courage to demand that his prosecutor should come with him before an unbiased court and lay out his accusation, thereby giving him the chance to defend himself.

Oh, that I had one to hear me!  
Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!

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<sup>1323</sup> 'The implicit disagreement in such competitive interpretations of the tradition is characteristic of the discourse that recurs throughout the Bible. It reaches its most dramatic height in the great debates of the Book of Job, which pit the Hellenistic revolt of Job's rationalism against the traditional pietism of his friends.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 65.

<sup>1324</sup> 'The beginning of wisdom is 'the fear of God'. That is 'righteousness'; that is philosophy. However, the 'fear of God', that appears in so much of the Bible's philosophical writings, is not quite the same as the 'terror of God' one can find it dressing up as in a story world – not even poor Job's nightmare Yahweh, roaring from his whirlwind (Job 38-41). 'Fear of God' and 'righteousness' begins, Plato-like, in the self-understanding of human ignorance. It is nothing other than the respect understood as due the unknown and unfathomable, the transcendent God'. Thompson, *Bible*, pp. 42-3.

Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!  
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;  
I would bind it upon my crown;  
I would give him an account of all my steps;  
Like a prince I would approach him.<sup>1325</sup>

In other words, in his extremity, Job finds the nerve and audacity to demand that Yahweh should come to meet him, which, is to say, forgo safe transcendence and take on risky immanence. And this, of course, is precisely what Yahweh does. Thompson in his usual manner cheapens this extraordinary encounter by speaking of it as 'Job's nightmare'. The fact is, of course, that we learn nothing new from Yahweh's actual discourse, for it makes no attempt to resolve the problem posed by the enormous inequalities and diversities of fortune which life gratuitously bestows on individuals, making some people's existence a living hell; but what is there within the universe that can make sense of this appalling conundrum?<sup>1326</sup> Clearly, the writer's point is not that such an encounter brings new insight about the human predicament but rather that it reveals Yahweh as the immanent, metacosmic god of Genesis 2-3 rather than the transcendent god of Genesis 1. This surely marks out his book as an anti-revisionist treatise, which means that, once again, Thompson couldn't be more misguided in trying to impose on it his revisionist 'exile' pattern.<sup>1327</sup>

#### 10. Thompson on the Saul and David stories.

Although Saul and David are described in these stories as offering very different and, at times, contrary strategic and organizational solutions to the problems Israel faced as a result of the Philistine pressure, when it comes to understanding their supposedly underlying, post-exilic, ideological structure Thompson sees them as patterned in essentially the same way. As figures of old Israel Saul and David are seen as tragic, for though they both begin well they end badly *because they did not obey the simple rule of blind obedience*:

Saul is Yahweh's chosen messiah. He is a hero's hero: a head taller than all other men. He becomes the scourge of the Philistines, who now play the Canaanites' role as archetype of Israel's enemies. ... Saul [however] fails the only test he was ever given: to be Yahweh's servant. The plot draws on stories of battles and kings, stories of bravery, honour and personal integrity. It is, however, cast in the spirit of early tragedy, at the heart of which is a rather unworldly piety that calls for allowing the gods to rule one's life. Saul's story is a variant of the story of old Israel.<sup>1328</sup>

Israel's new king [David] is [Yahweh's] 'beloved'. Yahweh believes he has found a home and a people to rule. No one, however, reflecting on the tragic leitmotif of this tradition is likely to forget the uncomfortably threatening story-line, suggesting as it does, that having a king for Israel had been an unwelcome human idea to Yahweh! Rather than relaxing and closing in peace and serenity after David's submission to God's will on the Mount of Olives in II Samuel 15, the story takes a relentless turn. David, Yahweh's faithful servant, goes on to arrange the murder of his own faithful

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<sup>1325</sup> Job 31. 35-37.

<sup>1326</sup> It is worth noting that this is quite as much a problem for atheists as it is for believers as I am constantly reminded when members of my family complain that life's not fair.

<sup>1327</sup> There is, of course, a great deal more that has to be said on this score but this is not the place since our concern here is simply with the underlying pattern of the work.

<sup>1328</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 94-95.



servant. David, the once 'beloved' of Yahweh, is now rejected. His son Solomon is chosen to be God's beloved in his stead, to rule over Israel as Yahweh's messiah. With David's fate, the story-teller is entirely pitiless. After Yahweh brings a plague against his people as punishment for his crime, David is left to die an old man, humiliated, cold and impotent. He needs to be nursed like a child, with a young girl to warm his bed.<sup>1329</sup>

So, according to Thompson, both stories are designed to teach the same simple lesson, that in order to have a place in the new Israel the only important rule is radical obedience – to walk in Gods' will<sup>1330</sup> – since failure to do so, for whatever reason, will inevitably result in rejection. But is this true? If it is I can only say that in my opinion the stories constitute the valueless remains of a worthless tradition. This may be the case of course for, as Davies reminds us, there is no intrinsic reason why stories written 2,500 years ago should appear morally valuable to us today ... except of course for the peculiar interest they have aroused in peoples of all cultures and descriptions over the ensuing generations!

I find it not only extraordinary that Thompson actually wants to trivialize these stories in the way he does but also intrinsically difficult to fit them into the very restrictive pattern he seeks to impose on them. This is because, as I see it, the stories themselves naturally demand to be understood in a very different way: as accounts of the sort of thing that generally happens when a community under pressure seeks to impose structural changes on itself. What happens, as we all know, is that the first attempt tends to be half-hearted because it stems from a compromise, the consequences being catastrophic for the community, and it is only as a result of this failure that the way is opened up for whole-hearted reform to take place. The problem with this scenario, which is so obviously present in the texts (much more obviously, in fact, than the pattern which Thompson seeks to persuade us was the one around which the texts were actually constructed) is that it demonstrates an historical interest<sup>1331</sup> and, as we know, Thompson is dead set on persuading us that the biblical texts display no such historical interest. Of course if we view the texts in the light of an underlying 'revolution'/ revisionism pattern we find them fitting not just well but, once again, like a glove.

### *Conclusion*

Reviewing the biblical literature Davies finds that a majority of the stories fit comfortably with a post-exilic point of view.<sup>1332</sup> Our own survey, however, suggests that no fit of any description exists at all. Indeed all attempts to force the stories into

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<sup>1329</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 96.

<sup>1330</sup> 'Saul's story, like Abraham's, is a morality tale. They are both variations on the theme of piety's commitment to the divine will. They shock to draw their theme. They preach to their audiences: 'Walk in God's will.' Abraham passes his test, demonstrating unshakable confidence that 'God will provide.' Saul fails his for lack of that quality.' Thompson, *Bible*, p. 95.

<sup>1331</sup> i.e. an interest in the way in which a community responds to historical pressures.

<sup>1332</sup> 'Not every major biblical myth (Davies uses this to mean an invented story as opposed to an historical account of something which actually happened) makes the best possible sense in the light of the conditions implied in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and indeed some may be later. But cumulatively, an impressive case can be made for the fifth century BCE as the time and Yehud as the place for formation of what biblical scholars call the 'biblical tradition', and what can more simply and accurately be called the biblical literature.' Davies, *In Search*, p. 92.

the minimalists' 'exile' pattern only succeeds in rendering them devoid of interest which means that the only way of maintaining the stories' *natural* interest is to forget about this post-exilic viewpoint. Whatever judgment readers come to in this matter I suggest that the idea that the biblical writers used the 'exile' pattern as the basis on which to create these stories is a complete non-starter; my own opinion being that one would be hard pressed to find a single story with which the pattern could be made to fit even half reasonably. This does not mean, of course, that the stories themselves are pre-exilic or that they were created with the intention of preserving Israel's history. These are questions which we will have to consider in the next chapter.

## Chapter 18

### Historicity, Dates and Patterns

The modern debate about the historicity of the texts of the Old Testament has largely centered on their age; early dates for them being taken as indicating that they may well contain a fair amount of real history and late dates that they probably contain very little, if any at all. In this regard the problem has been to establish a reasonably scientific way, upon which everyone can generally agree, to determine the age of a text.

At first, attempts were made to date texts linguistically, using developments in the Hebrew language, but this approach has now been discarded as unworkable. Later efforts have concentrated on identifying a knowledge of datable historical events betrayed by the biblical writers, which can be verified from extra-biblical sources. It has been argued that if this can be done it proves that the text in question can safely be assigned to a period later than this independently datable event. However, there are serious problems with this procedure. In the first place it has to be admitted that our knowledge of the history of central Palestine is so slight that there are very few key events which can be established and independently dated. Furthermore, the fact that the biblical texts show clear signs of editing makes it difficult to prove that the date one comes up with when using this particular procedure is anything other than the date of a text's final redaction. Because of this I believe that the dates provided by present-day scholars for biblical texts should be treated with great scepticism. I say this having in mind particularly the extremely late dates recently suggested. For the fact is that we have little more in the way of hard evidence to go on than early twentieth century scholars had when they attributed very early dates to the self-same texts. One can't help feeling that these late dates evidence more about the changing whims of scholars than about an actual increase in our knowledge on the subject.

For my part I have accepted a 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE date for P, firstly because it appears well established, and secondly because I find it verified by my own ideological findings.<sup>1333</sup> Further to this, using the criterion of independent, extra-biblical verification, I have argued for a date sometime prior to 745 BCE for my 'revolutionary' source J.<sup>1334</sup> This, I believe, is as far as the procedure of extra-biblical verification can take us at present. It would seem, therefore, that we are not going to be able to resolve this issue of the historicity of the Old Testament texts simply by finding a scientific way to date them. Clearly we shall have to think again.

#### *The Pattern of Reiteration*

The minimalists themselves have argued that the historicity of a text is a function not only of the available collective memory at the time of writing but also of the intentions

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<sup>1333</sup> P is clearly revisionist and revisionism fits perfectly with the point of view of the post exilic religious leadership.

<sup>1334</sup> See pp. 96-98 above.

of the author. For though it may appear to us that a story has been written with the purpose of conveying a memory of some past event this may simply be due to the fact that we are looking at it with modern eyes. One of the arguments which Thompson puts forward in defence of the minimalists' thesis that the biblical writers were not concerned with historicity is the supposed existence of *patterns* within the biblical texts which highlight the function of the stories as *reiterations* of dominant themes concerning the transcendent reality hidden within creation.<sup>1335</sup>

Thompson's theory of reiteration whereby one biblical story is seen to echo another is not easy to grasp. It involves patterns supposedly found within experiential stories which themselves supposedly are knitted together to form a community's history. However, as it turns out on closer inspection, these 'experiential' stories are revealed as being anything but experiential and the history they create as containing anything but historical fact! For these stories are supposedly dreamed up by their post-exilic authors in the belief that human experience is essentially falsifying, making it necessary to search for a deeper meaning in life than that which experience can disclose. Furthermore, the history created by these stories is essentially fictive since its purpose is to enlighten the present rather than to define the past. In short these stories are, at least in Thompson's understanding, quite simply ideological constructions designed to argue for an authoritarian, transcendent-god world-view in which man is seen as having dominance over creation under God's strict tutelage. We have already, in the previous chapter, analysed this 'exile' reading of the biblical texts: a pattern of continuity within discontinuity in which a new, faithful Israel, committed to radical obedience, is set over against an old unfaithful one which had been brought to nothing because of its disobedience. There our finding was that, though such a reading *may* possibly constitute the way in which the post-exilic biblical editors chose to *read* these texts when they collected them and knitted them together into their final form, it was certainly not the thinking which inspired the *creation* of the biblical stories in the first place. For the fact is that the imposition of this 'exile' pattern on the stories, far from imbuing them with added interest actually deprives them of the considerable interest, they naturally contain.

#### *Reiteration: fact or fiction?*

So is this reiteration business which Thompson writes about a fact or is it simply a product of his imagination? It is worth bearing in mind that biblical scholars are well known for their habit of discovering cross-referencing patterns within the texts which no one previously has been in the least bit aware of. It's what the French, with their acute political insight, call *un deformation professionnel*: in this case a scholar's way of demonstrating his knowledge and his ability to see things which others have missed. There is no doubt, of course, that cross references do exist in the Bible. One example that interests me is the evangelists' use of Isaiah's 'light of God' theme.<sup>1336</sup> However,

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<sup>1335</sup> 'This sense of history as an illustration of creation, this view of humanity living out a fate determined by its nature, dominates the biblical view of history as a reiteration of what has always been. It can best be seen through the many stories that present the recurrent theme of new creation, new beginnings and new hope. All play out their contrast to stories of human wilfulness. In the creation of such reiterative story chains, one finds recurrent echoes of characters who perform the same or a similar function. Within a biblical perspective, all reflect a single transcendent reality.' Thompson, *Bible*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>1336</sup> See Mt 4. 13-16; Lk 2.29-32; Acts 13.47; Acts 26.23; Jn 1. 4-5, 3. 19-21; Th 24;

such echoings are common knowledge not only because the evangelists take the trouble to flag them up but also because the Bible is such a well-studied volume.

Thompson claims that Mark's extended story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey,<sup>1337</sup> his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives<sup>1338</sup> and his crucifixion on a wooden cross<sup>1339</sup> is a reiteration of the extended story of David's flight from Jerusalem as a result of Absalom's uprising,<sup>1340</sup> his prayer on the Mount of Olives<sup>1341</sup> and his return to Jerusalem<sup>1342</sup> after of Absalom's death, hanging with his head caught in the branches of a tree.<sup>1343</sup> Since I intend to examine Thompson's thesis in detail I will quote him fully:

In II Samuel 15, David hunted by the army of his son Absalom, abandoned by all his friends and despairing of all hope, reaches the top of the Mount of Olives, overlooking the seat of his kingdom, Jerusalem, where Absalom holds power. It is important that this scene is set at the top of the Mount of Olives, because as the text tells us, it is 'there that men are wont to go to pray' (I Sam. 15: 32). It is time for David, the man of action, to give himself to prayer. The story implicitly responds to and illustrates the divine exhortation of Psalms 2: 8: 'Pray, and I will make the world your inheritance.' The story becomes a parable on the power of prayer. David has nothing left, and it is with a mood of despair that he climbs this mountain as to a last refuge. David weeps as he climbs the mountain. He is barefoot, his head bowed, and all his companions hold their heads bowed, weeping. For David, Absalom is already king. It is in David's speech to Zadok that the story clarifies its theme. Zadok's name, 'righteousness, discernment', cues the reader. It is as an illustration of piety's way of righteousness that the story takes its place in tradition. It is travelling this theological path with righteousness that David climbs, not merely the geographical and historical slope outside Jerusalem, but the mountain which tests his life to the core: 'If I find grace in Yahweh's eye, he will let me see once again his ark and his dwelling' (namely, Jerusalem). And then comes pietism's key, with which the entire tale is unlocked. 'But if he says that he no longer cares for me, so may he do to me as he sees is good!' David walks up the mountain as the man of piety, emptied of all self-will. He is the apogee of the ideal king, every pious man's representative as 'servant of Yahweh'. In his humility's success, David crosses over the mountain. Absalom is dead. Though Yahweh's Messiah, he has died ignominiously, hanging from a tree. Returning as its king, David rides a donkey down to Jerusalem; he is Yahweh's anointed, entering his kingdom!

It is as an everyman's tale of piety that the gospels have Jesus reiterate David's story as in Mark 14: 32-42, an illustration of Psalm 2: 8's exhortation to prayer. In the closure of his story, Mark transforms Absalom's role in his version of Yahweh's messiah on Golgotha. Foreshadowing the closure of the story, Jesus had been received into his kingdom, riding on his donkey in the story of his first entrance to Jerusalem. On the night before he dies, he fills David's role as pietism's everyman on the Mount of Olives. He climbs the mountain to Gethsemane's garden, returning us to Yahweh's garden and to the tree of life. Like David, Jesus is abandoned by his followers. He suffers despair, and is without hope. He goes to his mountain to pray, paraphrasing David's words in the voice of tradition: 'not my will but yours be done.' What does the text mean by its reiteration of this event? Both David and Jesus play the pious philosopher of reflection and discernment for one who wishes to walk in the path of righteousness with the story. Both pray where one is wont to pray, seeking his inheritance. The reader implied is the one who recognizes that it is not by the will of man but by the will of God that one enters his kingdom. This is reiterated history, a philosophical discourse of a tradition's meaning.<sup>1344</sup>

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<sup>1337</sup> Mk 11. 1-10.

<sup>1338</sup> Mk 14. 26-42.

<sup>1339</sup> Mk 15. 21-32.

<sup>1340</sup> II Sam 15. 13-29.

<sup>1341</sup> II Sam 15. 30-37.

<sup>1342</sup> II Sam 19. 11-23.

<sup>1343</sup> II Sam 18. 9-15.

<sup>1344</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, pp. 21-3.

### *Criticism*

The question is do the texts justify Thompson's thesis? Clearly Thompson basis his 'reiteration' claim on the fact that both extended stories contain:

1. An entry into Jerusalem on a donkey,
2. A Messiah's death hanging from a tree and
3. A pious prayer on the Mount of Olives.

Put baldly like that one might be tempted to think that he is perhaps on to something. However, as soon as you start looking at the actual texts everything falls apart.

#### 1. An entry into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Though Mark certainly describes Jesus as entering into Jerusalem on a donkey II Samuel never describes David as doing any such thing. Thompson affirms that it does but he has simply made it up. II Samuel describes Ziba the servant of Mephobosheth as providing David with two donkeys.<sup>1345</sup> They are laden with food and drink for the king's escape from Jerusalem and Absalom's approaching forces. According to the text Ziba's purpose in offering the king these donkeys (once the food and drink had been consumed) was to transport 'the king's household' which presumably means his wives and toddlers, the king himself being expected to walk. As far as David's return to Jerusalem is concerned no mention of transport of any kind is made and David is certainly never portrayed in II Samuel as returning to Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

#### 2. A Messiah's death hanging from a tree.

It is difficult to understand why Thompson insists on using the word Messiah rather than King when speaking about Absalom's death except, of course, for the fact that Jesus was no king and Thompson wished to link the two. There is no reference in the texts to Absalom as the Lord's anointed which means that there is little warrant for speaking of his undignified demise as 'the death of Yahweh's Messiah'. It is true, of course, that at one point David speaks of Absalom as king,<sup>1346</sup> and that the loyal Hushai, whom David sends back to Jerusalem with the intention of getting him to trick Absalom into making the wrong tactical moves, vigorously greets Absalom on his arrival in the city as Israel's new ruler.<sup>1347</sup> However, nowhere else in the tradition is Absalom designated king of Israel. So in what sense can Jesus' death on the cross be said to reiterate Absalom's ignominious demise? For Thompson, this 'death on a tree' business contributes nothing to the ideological kernel of either story, which we will be dealing with next. This suggests that for him the crucifixion plays no significant role apart from flagging up the fact that Mark's story should be seen as a reiteration of II Samuel. I leave the reader to ponder this mystery.

#### 3. A pious prayer on the Mount of Olives.

Mark certainly describes Jesus as praying on the Mount of Olives that he be spared the death he saw awaiting him and as adding the rider 'Not my will but yours be done.'<sup>1348</sup>

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<sup>1345</sup> II Sam 16. 1.

<sup>1346</sup> II Sam 15. 19.

<sup>1347</sup> II Sam 16. 16.

<sup>1348</sup> Mk 14. 36.

However, though II Samuel describes David as also offering a prayer to God on the Mount of Olives:

David said, "O Lord, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."<sup>1349</sup>

it is not this prayer that Thompson speaks about at length. Thompson is well aware that David's 'pious' utterance comes in a conversation with Zadok just as he is about to leave the city:

Then the king said to Zadok, "carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and its habitation; but if he says, 'I have no pleasure in you,' behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him."<sup>1350</sup>

Thompson sees this remark (it is hardly a prayer) as clarifying the theme of this whole Mount of Olives/prayer episode.<sup>1351</sup> But how can a clarification come *before* the episode it clarifies? The idea is absurd. It is, of course, a big embarrassment for Thompson that David's pious utterance isn't made in the form of a prayer and that it doesn't actually take place on the Mount of Olives, for he insists heavily on the Mount of Olives as being a place of prayer.<sup>1352</sup> However, an even bigger difficulty for him is in making David's remark square with Jesus' prayer, for his central aim is to show that both of these stories present their hero as a pious philosopher of reflection and discernment who wishes to walk, emptied of self-will, in the path of righteousness. For this, as Thompson sees it, is the ideological heart of both of these stories and indeed of the entire Bible. That is Thompson's reading but what do the texts themselves actually present?

II Samuel's description of David is complex, far more complex than Thompson, in his obsession with post-exilic patterns, allows for. Here at this juncture David finds himself, partly as a result of his own mistakes and failures and partly as a result of circumstances beyond his control, on the run from a rebellion mounted by his son. He is naturally extremely downcast and near to despair. However, he doesn't lose his head but uses the little room he has left for manoeuvre to gain time by urging some of his councillors to stay in Jerusalem with the objective of dissuading Absalom from driving home his advantage. Having done this he makes his escape as best he can with the rest of his friends, throwing himself on God's mercy, counting on him to bring his plan to fruition.

The synoptics' description of passion week, on the other hand, is of a man who sees himself as bringing to completion his chosen task: fulfilling Israel's job of being the light to lighten the Gentiles. Far from being like David, a man on the run, Jesus is described as the one setting the pace. If on the Mount of Olives Jesus asks to be delivered it is not because he has run out of options. It is rather because he sees that his chosen option is leading him almost certainly to a hideous death and his only hope is that God might make it turn out otherwise. Here, therefore, there is no question of Jesus throwing himself on God's mercy. Here there is simply a forlorn hope that the expected backlash may not in fact materialize.

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<sup>1349</sup> II Sam 15. 31(b).

<sup>1350</sup> II Sam 15 25-26.

<sup>1351</sup> 'It is in David's speech to Zadok that the story clarifies its theme.'

<sup>1352</sup> The text does not in fact refer to the Mount of Olives as being a place of prayer but to its being a place of worship.

According to the Bible David's prayer was answered whereas Jesus' clearly wasn't. This fact, amongst many others already cited, highlights such a monumental lack of similarity between these 'stories' as to make any superficial likenesses inconsequential if indeed any can be truly established. So how can Thompson possibly bring these stories together under his 'pious philosopher emptied of self-will' scenario? The answer is: only with the greatest of difficulty, for *neither* story fits comfortably with this 'mindless' pattern. Thompson tries to pull it off by talking about Jesus being forced to rely solely on God because all of his friends had abandoned him:

Like David, Jesus is abandoned by his followers. He suffers despair, and is without hope. He goes to his mountain to pray, paraphrasing David's words in the voice of tradition: 'not my will but yours be done.'

But of course it is simply not true to say that David was abandoned by his friends<sup>1353</sup> or to pretend that Jesus was forced by his predicament to rely on God. Indeed it was reliance on God (the god of the marginals) that got Jesus into his predicament in the first place and only his self-will that got him through it. The conclusion seems to me to be inescapable. The pious philosopher pattern may exist but only in Thompson's head (and just possibly in the collective imagination of a section of Israel's post-exilic religious leadership though I would like to see this proved). Furthermore it has to be said that the imposition of this pattern on both texts does neither of them any service for it reduces them to pietistic drivel which will hardly satisfy anyone but those with a taste for such a thing.

#### *The 'Revolution'/Revisionism Pattern.*

In putting forward his thesis of a post-exilic reiterations-pattern Thompson seeks to demonstrate that the biblical writers were concerned to justify their own position and worldview and not with matters of historicity. However, close inspection reveals that this pattern is a chimera. For *there is no such thing as an 'exile' pattern, in which a new and faithful Israel is set over against an old and faithless one, to be found in the bulk of the Old Testament texts* – though it is possible that the post-exilic leadership (P and his friends including the chronicler) collected and edited the texts from this point of view. That said, there most certainly is a pattern displayed by the Old Testament writings as a whole. I have labelled it 'revolution'/revisionism. Thompson's post-exilic, transcendent-god world-view, in which it is understood that mankind has been set in dominion over creation with strict instructions as to how to behave – an ideology in which mindless obedience is advocated and human will and creativity abjured – has, of course, its place *within* this greater 'revolution'/revisionism pattern. However, it takes the form of a secondary denial of the god of the marginals and not that of an independent rationale as Thompson would have it.

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<sup>1353</sup> Rather the story insists that David had to persuade some of his friends (Ittai [15. 19] Abiathar and Zadok [15. 27] Hushai [15. 32]) not to follow him by telling them that they could better serve his interests by staying in Jerusalem.



*The 'revolution'/revisionism pattern as undeniable yet ignored*

The curious thing is that though the evidence in the Bible for the 'revolution'/revisionism pattern is overwhelming you will find almost nothing about it in the majority of works penned by twentieth century scholars, maximalist and minimalist alike. There are a few notable exceptions, of course. We have already mentioned the work of George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald. To this we can add that of George V. Pixley. He described the various elements making up the general pattern thus:

- In the beginning there is a 'Canaanite class struggle' aided by 'the liberation of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.'<sup>1354</sup>
- This produces a libertarian, anti-state, classless society as described in the books of Joshua, Judges and I Samuel.<sup>1355</sup>
- This in turn, in the face of the Philistine (counter-revolutionary) oppression, leads to the setting up of the monarchy under David as an historical compromise.<sup>1356</sup>
- Then in the following period of the monarchy the royal court and the Jerusalem temple become the cradle of a revisionist ideology of dominance.<sup>1357</sup>
- Following the downfall of the monarchy the return of the exiles constituted a period of ideological struggle between the revisionist priests<sup>1358</sup> and a more populist movement represented by Deutero-Isaiah, the latter believing that God's 'rulership of the nations was not to be exerted from the top, but from the gentle persuasion of the truth by God's servant Israel who is to become a light to lighten the Gentiles. The struggle was eventually won by the priests.'<sup>1359</sup>

Indeed Pixley goes further still and argues that this pattern has to be seen as the backdrop against which Jesus' own contribution is evaluated:

Jesus' project can be rightly understood only when Israel's revolutionary project of realizing Yahweh's kingdom in the land of Canaan is first understood.<sup>1360</sup>

Though I am critical of several aspects of Pixley's view of biblical history, I happily recognise his discernment of the Bible's revolution/revisionist pattern. However, during the twentieth century writers like him were clearly in a small minority. So how can I explain this strange phenomenon of *an undeniable pattern almost universally*

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<sup>1354</sup> George V. Pixley, *God's Kingdom: A Guide for Biblical Study*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981) p. 28.

<sup>1355</sup> 'From these texts we can take it as an established fact that not only did early Israel not have a state, but also that its existence was a deliberate rejection of states.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 24.

<sup>1356</sup> 'For over two centuries Israel existed as Yahweh's kingdom, fighting off constant attempts of the surrounding states to subdue them anew. Then, under the fierce pressure of the culturally more advanced Philistines, Israel chose a king for itself.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>1357</sup> '...in succeeding generations the royal court and the Jerusalem temple became the creators of a theological justification for domination even superior to the Baal cults of the previous Canaanite overlords.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 54.

<sup>1358</sup> '[In the Jewish community in exile in Babylon] ...the priests prepared their return. They planned the reconstruction of the Temple and the recapture of their place of privilege within society. ... It was among the exiles in Babylon that the priestly document (P) of the Pentateuch was written. This was a revisionist history of Israel's antecedents in creation, patriarchal wanderings, exodus, wilderness wanderings, and the occupation of the land of Canaan.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 56.

<sup>1359</sup> 'The restoration was (unfortunately) a project of the priests and not of the people, who must have listened hopefully to Deutero-Isaiah.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 61.

<sup>1360</sup> Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 19.

*ignored?* There are, as I see it, three possible reasons why the majority of scholars were silent about this pattern. First, because of the Bible's religious form of expression many scholars were as yet still labouring under the impression that it was concerned with religion rather than ideology. Second, because of their lack of political sophistication many scholars were persuaded that revolution consists of a violent manifestation of class interests and they rightly found nothing of this in the biblical texts. Third, almost certainly twentieth century biblical historians were in some deep part of themselves half-aware that this pattern's marginal perspective constitutes an unbearable attack on their own civilization world of privilege, making it safest not to admit to its presence. However, in my opinion none of these considerations amounts to an adequate excuse.

- The fact that, like all ancient Near Eastern documents, the Bible expresses itself in religious language manifestly cannot be taken as an indication that it is concerned with religious rather than ideological issues.
- Since violent struggle between class interests constitutes only one type of revolutionary behaviour the lack of evidence for such conduct in the biblical texts cannot be taken as evidence that the Bible does not advocate 'revolution'.
- Give the position of scholars within society as civilization's clerks, they should *expect* to find an ideology produced by marginals hostile to rather than confirming of their own interests.

*The objective and story underlying the 'revolution'/revisionism pattern.*

I believe that any intelligent person reading the Bible without prejudice will come to see it as being about a god who seeks to save the world by calling on his own people to demonstrate how human beings should live together. That, spelled out in religious terms, is *the objective* the biblical god sets out to attain *the story* itself being the progress (or lack of it) made by the faithful community in fulfilling this endeavour. I consider this objective and story as given presuppositions which need no substantiation since I find them uncontroversial.<sup>1361</sup> Problems only arise, as I see it, when it comes to translating this objective and story into our own post-enlightenment, ideological language. Here we have to take up what Thompson says about the role of deities in ideological conversation in antiquity.

The relationship that was described between gods and lands was a rational reflection on international politics. The story structures of religious thought understood the world of the divine and the world of peoples as mirror reflections of each other.<sup>1362</sup>

What Thompson is saying here is that ancient Near Eastern communities expressed themselves ideologically by telling stories about their gods, these myths being mirror reflections of the political realities people faced in their everyday lives. This being the case, the business of translating thoughts expressed religiously into our own ideological language should be fairly straightforward.

*The objective as saving the world from religious alienation or ideological alianation?*

Given that the biblical writers were concerned with the way in which their god intended to save the world (civilisation) from a fundamental flaw he had discovered within it, it

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<sup>1361</sup> Should it be seriously disputed the situation would, of course, need to be reviewed.

<sup>1362</sup> Thompson, *Bible*, p. 92. See above p. 358.

is obviously necessary to understand what this defect was. Traditionally the answer has been that it was 'sin', understood religiously as a fall, meaning an alienation of mankind from God. In this way God's purpose for mankind has been seen in terms of redemption/salvation-history, meaning a return to an original state of blissful unity with God. However, as we have pointed out, such an understanding is based on an outlandish reading of the Bible's mythical story which not only undermines the story's basic logic (no return is possible) by imposing upon it a religious fantasy (redemption) taken from elsewhere (Christian belief) but which also avoids the whole point of the exercise which is to tell a story that reflects an ideological point of view concerning the real political world and its all too obvious problems, and a proposed solutions for these.

*Who were the people with a saving ideological perspective?*

So we must take it that the Bible's objective and general strategy are expressions of a conviction that civilization is in an ideological mess from which it needs rescuing. Given this situation the question becomes: what is the ideological perspective from which the biblical writers were working which enabled them 1) to identify what was going wrong in civilization and 2) to envisage a way of doing something about it. Now the fact is that ideological perspectives reflect social interests. Aristocrats, members of the bourgeoisie and proletarians all see the same world but their descriptions of it vary greatly because their views are modified by differing interests. The fact is that at any given moment all classes are likely to be dissatisfied with the actual state of civilization and to have ideas about how it could be improved. However, these proposals are unlikely to be similar. So the question is where were the Israelites coming from in viewing the deficiencies of civilization in the way they did and proposing the changes they proposed? Given the way in which the people of the ancient Near East expressed their ideological convictions, if the Israelites had been aristocrats (like P and his friends) we might have expected them to propose a transcendent god who offers the blessing of protection in exchange for loyalty and radical obedience. If they had been members of the bourgeoisie we might have expected them to propose a revolutionary god who offers the blessedness which results from acquiring liberty, equality and fraternity. Whereas if they had been proletarians or even peasants we might have expected them to propose a revolutionary god who offers the blessedness which results from a classless society, as Pixley proposes.<sup>1363</sup>

*Clearly they were not a social class*

However, the fact is that what the intelligent reader actually finds in the Bible does not square with any of these 'class' positions, whether status quo or revolutionary. What he or she finds is the following religiously-expressed pattern of development:

Yahweh as god of the Hebrews inspires Moses to call on the Israelites to work in partnership with their god. He must persuade them to stand up and expose the shamefulness of the way in which civilization is treating them, with the promise that if they do this Yahweh will vindicate them. The movement thus created eventually takes the form of a flight from oppression and the establishment of a

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<sup>1363</sup> 'In the thirteenth century B.C. there emerged in Canaan an attempt on the part of various peasant groups moved by the spirit of liberty, the aspiration of a classless society.' Pixley, *Kingdom*, p. 53.

new community in the highlands of central Palestine – the ‘promised land’. Here the community sets about living together in a new way, in which Yahweh reigns, which is to say according to his Law. However, immediately on becoming established the new community is beset by both internal backsliding and external aggression. This leads eventually to a structural compromise and the establishment of the monarchy. However, though this solves the immediate problem concerning the struggle for survival, internal backsliding and external aggression continue to undermine the community, with the new structural change possibly aggravating the situation. This backsliding is denounced by a succession of prophets who take it upon themselves to speak for Yahweh in his name. They announce with increasing vehemence that if the community does not return to its former faithful ways Yahweh will punish the people by returning them to slavery. The prophets are vindicated when the community is destroyed, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. However, the people are given a second chance when the Persian king Cyrus destroys Babylon and allows a remnant of those taken into exile to return.

This ongoing pattern of development doesn’t stop here, of course, but we are obliged to choose some arbitrary cut-off point in order to consider the pattern’s fundamental nature. Of course it will be necessary to describe it in our own ideological terms if we wish to assess it properly.

*Clearly they were revolutionaries but not class revolutionaries*

If we agree that the objective of the Bible’s god is to rescue civilization from itself then it stands to reason that the Bible’s champion, Yahweh, must represent some ideology other than that which was currently in place. If we further define revolution as a change in which the power relationships within a community are radically reorganized along new lines it stands to reason that the pattern of development described by the Bible must be seen as revolutionary – leaving aside all questions of how<sup>1364</sup> and by whom<sup>1365</sup> the uncharacterised changes<sup>1366</sup> are brought about. This conclusion is more than adequately confirmed by the above pattern of development when we take into account its religious expression. For it is clearly the story of Moses as a revolutionary leader (of some sort) who is inspired by a revolutionary ideology (of some sort) and who sets in motion a revolutionary movement (of some sort) which eventually produces a community organized in a completely different manner (of some sort); this is then immediately attacked both externally by counter-revolutionary forces and internally by revisionists who seek to re-establish within it something of the old discarded pattern of living (whatever this was) and there follows a period of ideological conflict between the revolutionary, counter-revolutionary and revisionist forces which extends indefinitely ... or just until the revolution becomes firmly established ... or is overthrown ... or is itself put into question by some further revolutionary change.

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<sup>1364</sup> i.e. by violent or non-violent means.

<sup>1365</sup> i.e. by what class or group of people.

<sup>1366</sup> Power to the bourgeoisie, or power to the proletariat or power to some other group.

So the biblical objective, or more correctly the objective of its god, was to rescue civilization from itself, the perspective motivating this strategy being a new ideology (of some sort) and the pattern of change that this ideology set in motion being a revolutionary struggle (of some description) – but *who exactly were the revolutionaries?* This is that last and most important piece of our jig-saw puzzle which, once found, will fill in all of the above ‘some-sort-or-other’ gaps, rendering everything finally plain. For knowing who these revolutionaries were will *define* the actual viewpoint of the Bible, *define* its ideology, *define* its objective and strategy. So the question is, were these Israelites religious heroes as previous generations of maximalist scholars maintained? Or were they aristocratic, priestly administrators as Thompson and the minimalists assert? Or were they bourgeois libertarians as scholars such as Marcus Borg appear to maintain? Or were they peasant proletarians as Mendenhall, Gottwald, Pixley and Crossan have argued?

*They could only have been marginal ‘revolutionaries’*

The argument throughout this book has been that they were none of these things but, rather, outcast marginals. Let me briefly rehearse the evidence:

- Why does the Yahwist refer to these revolutionaries as Hebrews – ‘apiru –if not to indicate that they were militant outcasts i.e. ‘revolutionaries’ as opposed to revolutionaries?<sup>1367</sup>
- Why does the Yahwist insist Yahweh is the god of the Hebrews if not because he sees Yahweh as being by nature god of the marginals which is to say the one who represents the interests of those who find themselves trashed?
- Why does the Yahwist in his Genesis stories insist on the younger son inheriting if not to signal that Israel was a revolutionary community of marginals or former marginals?
- Why does the Yahwist insist Yahweh gave humans no status in creation if not to indicate he is the god of those who know very well that they have no status?
- Why does the Yahwist describe Yahweh as protecting Cain by putting his mark upon him if not because he sees Yahweh as god of the marginals?
- Why does P preface the Yahwist’s work with a myth about a transcendent god of dominance if not as a revisionist attempt to suffocate the god of the marginals?
- Why does Amos in his confrontation with Amaziah insist that he has no status if not to indicate that he speaks on behalf of the god of the marginals?
- Why does the Yahwist insist Yahweh was a needless, metacosmic god if not to represent his anti-cosmic (anti-survival-of-the-fittest) and pro-marginal nature?
- Why does the Yahwist portray Yahweh as an immanent god if not to indicate his ‘revolutionary’ as opposed to *status quo* transcendent character?

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<sup>1367</sup> I am not suggesting that the Yahwist was aware of the difference between class and marginal revolutionaries. I am simply suggesting that in calling them ‘apiru he was indicating that the Israelites were aware of the fact that they had no status or place in civilisation.

- Why does the Yahwist insist Yahweh called for a reactive strategy of demonstration and exposure if not because he was the god of those who possess no proactive strength?
- Why does the Yahwist insist that Yahweh is a partnership god if not to highlight the fact that as god of the marginals he demands a reactive strategy as opposed to one involving organised force?
- Why do the prophets characteristically reject foreign alliances if not to insist that Israel as a ‘revolutionary’ community was committed to a reactive strategy rather than to the normal civilisation strategy of organised force?
- Why is Israelite law unique in advocating radical solidarity and the protection of the foreigner if not because of its unique commitment to the god of the marginals?
- Why were the Hebrews unusual in having few preoccupations about life after death if not because as marginals their problem was with living not dying?
- Why does the idea of election only appear in texts classically given a late date if not because of the community’s tendency, as time went on, to draw a veil over its embarrassing marginal origins?
- Why do the books of Joshua, Judges and I Samuel adopt an anti-monarchy stance (in Israel Yahweh alone is king) if not because centrarchy is seen as being a system which naturally trashes people?
- Why do the prophets condemn the whole of society (rather than a specific section of it) if not because they saw themselves as fighting the cancer of revisionism which tended to affect everyone?
- Why does Isaiah speak of Israel as having the task of being the light to lighten the Gentiles if he does not see her as working with a reactive, god-of-the-marginals, world-transforming strategy?

*This is confirmed by their impossibly foolish, non-violent strategy*

However, it is not just the evidence of the god of the marginals within the texts, strong as it is, which indicates that this revolutionary pattern of thought should be attributed to such a group of people. The very fact that the Bible presents itself as a concrete,<sup>1368</sup> though almost impossible to realise,<sup>1369</sup> universal solution to civilisation’s problems by means of demonstration and exposure rather than proactive force, indicates that it can’t have come from the struggles of one of civilisation’s own internal groups. For these, however much they might have felt oppressed, were never completely deprived of proactive possibilities. *It must, therefore, have come rather from those who found themselves trashed, from those deprived of the normal proactive means of defending their interests, as I have already explained above.*<sup>1370</sup>

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<sup>1368</sup> i.e. ideological as opposed to religious ‘pie in the sky’ as some might say

<sup>1369</sup> The Jewish Bible is clearly the story of the heroic failure of the Hebrews to carry out their allotted task.

<sup>1370</sup> See pp. 147-148 above.

### *Revolution and historicity*

Given the existence of this pattern of ‘revolution’/revisionism within the biblical texts the question now arises whether the texts are concerned with matters of actual history. In answering this question it seems to me that we are presented with three possibilities:

- Either the pattern resulted from a haphazard arrangement of independent stories which, by accident, were put together in such a way as to present a ‘revolution’/revisionism schema.
- Or the pattern resulted from an attempt to imagine a fictive ‘revolution’.
- Or the pattern witnesses to some sort of memory of an actual historical ‘revolution’.

We can immediately exclude the accident thesis as wildly improbable. Stories are not accidentally put together in such a complex form any more than chimpanzees offered a pen and paper accidentally produce a Leonardo sketch. The imaginary ‘revolution’ scenario is scarcely more plausible. Even in our own times, when people are much more skilled in the art of writing, and much more conversant with the revolution/revisionism scenario, no one that I know of has attempted to create the story of a imaginary revolution, let alone the story of a revolutionary struggle conducted by marginals. So we can safely conclude that the existence of this revolution/revisionism pattern within the bible must mean that a ‘revolution’ actually took place sometime, somewhere, the biblical texts constituting some sort of memory of it.

### *Forward-looking revolutionary histories and backward-looking status-quo histories*

We should in any case have realised this was the case for even if in the past the situation was often badly understood it has always been appreciated that history is the Bible’s thing: a feature which distinguishes it from other ancient literatures. Formerly, biblical scholars were in the habit of explaining this difference by saying that whereas other nations worshiped pagan nature-gods Israel worshiped a god who revealed himself in his historical activity. This formulation is nowadays heavily criticised, and rightly so. In the first place it misrepresents the Canaanite gods who were certainly viewed by their devotees as acting in history quite as much as Yahweh did. In the second place it is seen as objectionable in that it constitutes a religious statement which cannot be verified or disproved. The truth is somewhat different. The Bible is indeed heavily into history but this is simply because it is the product of a ‘revolutionary’ movement and *all revolutionary movements regard history as crucial*. Normal societies are characterised as *status quo*: as situations in which changes and development simply constitute a reshuffling of the cards already in place. In *status quo* societies like our own, history is important only as a backward reference which defines who you are, since such societies, however much they change and develop, are going nowhere. Revolutionary situations are quite different since they constitute a clear break with the past and the embarkation upon the realisation of something new. Consequently for revolutionaries history is not a backward reference defining who one is. Rather, as participants in a movement going somewhere history is a forward reference defining whether the movement they are involved in will be vindicated or fail. This is precisely how it is in most of the Bible’s texts, though not in the revisionist ones, of course. For

the Yahwist and Co. history matters terribly because it alone will be the judge of their ideology.

*The historian's task given modern scholarship's findings*

So one thing can be stated with absolute assurance: A Hebrew revolution which created a completely new, forward-looking, live, historical awareness in its militants must at some time and somewhere have occurred. This means that biblical historians worth their salt are obliged to reckon with it by finding out when and where it took place. Such an exercise is bound to impact on the question of the dating of the texts themselves, though it is difficult to say quite how before a proper discussion on the subject is engaged. What we *can* for the moment say is that the Bible clearly constitutes one of the few recoverable traces left by this 'revolution', others being the archaeological remains and worldwide Jewry and Christianity. Does this mean, therefore, that we can now go back to the old pre-minimalist ways of simply accepting the biblical texts as basically trustworthy accounts of what happened in ancient Israel? The short answer is no! The minimalists may have been monumentally wrong in so far as they pretended that the biblical writers had no real concern with history but they were certainly not wrong in being sceptical about the adequacy of the biblical texts as the basis for a modern, civilisation-history of ancient Palestine. So how do we put these two things together – the fact that the Hebrews were critically concerned with history as the judge of their 'revolutionary' endeavour and the fact that modern historians, on the basis of archaeology and the Bible's internal inconsistencies, find the Hebrews' histories highly suspect from our civilisation point of view?

It seems to me that this apparent contradiction can be explained in a number of ways. First, of course, it has to be remembered that the Hebrews wrote descriptively, not analytically. They therefore used all sorts of representational techniques which scholars today find hard to understand and even harder to translate. Because of this it is all too easy for scholars to discard or ignore aspects of the biblical writers' work, considering them as 'religious matters' which are not historically pertinent, when in fact they are crucial to understanding the *ideological* view of history the biblical writers as 'revolutionaries' were endeavouring to express.<sup>1371</sup>

Second, the contradiction between the Hebrews evident concern with history and the fact that modern historians find their data unreliable can be explained to some extent by remembering that the Hebrew writers had a *revolutionary* (as opposed to *status quo*) understanding of history in which the subject matter was seen as alive and going places. Because of this they stand much closer to Marxist historians writing, for example, about the Soviet or Chinese revolutions, though of course the revolutions they were engaged in were very different affairs. This revolutionary aspect completely throws most modern scholars because, like the Bible's Canaanites, as well as, it has to be said, the post-exilic revisionists, they too have a deeply embedded *status quo* understanding of the subject matter, in which history is seen as a dead past whose only real significance is in justifying the present. In this regard it is interesting to note Keith Whitelam's

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<sup>1371</sup> See, for example above p. 376, Thompson's silence on the crucial 'religious' fact that Yahweh finally encounters Job which, properly understood, is not a religious fact at all but an ideological one: viz Yahweh is seen not a transcendent god but rather an immanent though metacosmic god.



stress on the importance of writing a Canaanite history of ancient Palestine in order to counterbalance the bible's own Israelite history.<sup>1372</sup> There is a lot to be said for Whitelam's basic thesis that 'the history of ancient Palestine has been ignored and silenced by biblical studies because its object of interest has been an ancient Israel conceived and presented as the taproot of Western civilisation'. I have no difficulty in going along with the idea that biblical studies have not only been *illicitly religiously controlled* by those who have seen the Bible primarily as the fountainhead of Christianity but also that biblical studies have been *illicitly historiographically controlled* by those who have seen the Bible as a cornerstone of Western civilisation. I say this because I too am aware how often in the past, as in the present, history writing turns out to be more about a justification of a certain *status quo* than it is about the truth of what happened to bring this *status quo* about. I call this a *dead history* both because it has no interest apart from that of glorifying a certain present and also to distinguish it from the *live history* furnished by revolutionaries whose focus is on the future as much as on the present, there being where their hoped-for vindication lies. As long as Whitlam's criticism is levelled solely against those who, because of their *status quo* preconceptions, conspire to misinterpret the Bible I remain at one with him. It is only when he goes further and uses the same *status quo* criticisms against the biblical writers themselves that I start to become uneasy:

What is fascinating about the Hebrew Bible is that it appears to contain competing conceptions of the past, particularly in the Deuteronomic History and Chronicles, which suggest competing presents. Yet, above all, it gives access to the privileged conceptions of reality of a literary stratum of society revealing little or nothing of what Hobsbawm terms the 'sub-literate culture' of the deep-seated movements of history.

Had Whitlam confined his criticisms to the revisionist biblical writers (Ezekiel, P, Chronicles etc) who, like us, clearly see history from this dead, *status quo* perspective I would have been prepared to go along with him. However, to criticise the revolutionary Hebrew writers of operating with a *status quo* view of history is sheer perversity and simply demonstrates an inability even to identify revolutionary literature, let alone deal with it. It is true that the Bible's 'revolutionary' texts must have been recorded by scribes but revolutions have always included a fair number of people whose class interests were contradicted by their ideological affiliations – Moses for one. Talking about the deep-seated movements of history which spring from sub-literate cultures, as Whitlam does, is all very well but dealing with them as an historian is another matter. The truth is that the historian is severely limited when it comes to an understanding of ancient sub-literate cultures, which is not to say that we should not applaud his or her efforts to do so. What is worse is the fact that even if by some extraordinary chance we did have access to people who had lived in such cultures it would be difficult to ascertain their true aspirations since everything we know about modern subordinate cultures suggests that to a large extent such people unwittingly take on board the alienating ideology of their *status quo* overlords. This makes it all the more strange that Whitlam overlooks the real chance that the Bible has furnished us all with: a counter-*status quo* marginal ideology encapsulating the very interests of the people he appears to be so desperate to encounter. In short, 'the contrapuntal reading of Palestinian history from a non-Western point of view', which he is so anxious to uncover, is already lying there in the Bible right under his nose, only he cannot see it.

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<sup>1372</sup> Whitlam, *Invention* pp. 228-234.

Third, the contradiction between the Hebrews evident concern with history and the fact that modern historians find their data unreliable can be explained up to a point by remembering that the Hebrew writers were expressing themselves as *marginals*. The fact is that modern biblical historians, who as we have already said show precious little understanding of the normal class-revolutionary viewpoint, show no understanding whatsoever of the way in which marginals view the world and, given their social positions, how could they? The sad truth is that modern scholars stand less than a cat's chance in hell of appreciating what the biblical writers were trying to do in recounting their history because as academics they see history from a civilisation viewpoint: that is, *in terms of the way in which societies functioned given the ebb and flow of the major powers in the geographic area they occupied*. But this is clearly not how the Hebrews, as *marginal* revolutionaries, saw things. For them, what happened in the empires was basically irrelevant *since such empires constituted the problem not the solution*, which is why they seldom speak about such matters. More interesting for them were the successes and failures of the surrounding 'cousin' communities who shared Israel's basic interests if not her ideological awareness, since important lessons could be learned from their fate. In other words the empires would only become players in the great game the biblical 'revolutionary' writers were interested in, and as such worthy of consideration, when they finally were shamed into their senses in the 'last days'. Consequently, treating such empires as the historical touchstone, as modern historians invariably do, simply precludes all understanding of the great game the Bible is concerned to expound upon.

So, of course, it is true that these Hebrew writers used mythological language when communicating about their ideological viewpoint and strategy and, of course, it is true that they felt free to express themselves in ways that we find politically and scientifically shocking but what would you expect? They were marginals, former marginals or people who had committed themselves to maintain solidarity with such people, not polite and well-bred civilisation-folk entirely happy with this comfortable situation like ourselves. That is what makes what they have to say interesting and what we have to say about them, as historians, more often than not worthless ... unless we too are prepared to live without privileges in radical solidarity as they tried to do.

## Chapter 19

### Jewish Apocalyptic

We come now to the last group of literary works in the Jewish Bible and to the question of Jewish apocalyptic. Before actually engaging with this topic I want to place on record my aversion to these writings by admitting that, like many people, I have tended to ignore them. My unworthy justification for doing so has been my impression that the returning exiles learnt little from their experience which led to a steady downward ideological spiral within the community until Jesus finally pulled things 'round. Given this understanding there seemed little point in wasting time and effort in trying to understand what Jewish apocalyptic and other post-exilic writers were on about. I make this confession in the hope that readers will now join me in undertaking to overcome this common prejudice.

#### *Jewish Apocalyptic as Weird Beliefs in Miraculous Salvation?*

Typically, Christianity has considered Jewish apocalyptic writings to be a retreat from the high water mark left in the Jewish Bible by the classical prophets since they seem to lack the latter's strong, ethical and history-centred perspective. In line with this, as I have previously stated, it has been claimed by some that Jewish apocalyptic constituted the weird belief that in certain circumstances God is prepared to save his faithful servants by intervening directly in history and changing the natural course of events.<sup>1373</sup> To see just how far such a conjecture is justified we will examine Jewish apocalyptic with the aid of two scholars, Paul D. Hanson<sup>1374</sup> and Christopher Rowland.<sup>1375</sup>

#### *The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature*

##### *1. Jewish apocalyptic according to Paul Hanson*

Hanson claims that a grave mistake was made by early twentieth century biblical scholars in seeing the book of Daniel as *the beginnings* of Jewish apocalyptic. According to him Daniel should properly be categorised rather as an example of *late* Jewish apocalyptic.<sup>1376</sup> Hanson suggests that this mistake, coupled with the very striking differences between Daniel and the classical prophets, led scholars to conclude either that Jewish apocalyptic was 'a decadent, late development with no religious worth' – as Martin Buber<sup>1377</sup> for example had argued – or 'a new phenomenon without

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<sup>1373</sup> See above p. 39

<sup>1374</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979)

<sup>1375</sup> Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982)

<sup>1376</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 4.

<sup>1377</sup> Martin Buber, *Kampf um Israel: Reden und Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1933) pp. 59ff.

primary connections to prophetic Yahwism' – as Von Rad,<sup>1378</sup> for his part, had claimed. Against these positions, which saw Jewish apocalyptic as novel and as stemming from alien influences – such as Helenism or Persian dualism – Hanson argues that an examination of the late prophetic works clearly shows that it was, on the contrary, the consequence of a development which took place *within prophetic Yahwism*. He maintains that Jewish apocalyptic came about as a direct result of the way in which the post-exilic community splintered into opposing sects, each producing its own self-justifying literature. According to this hypothesis, we are presented on the one hand with the works of Isaiah 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14, showing clear signs of apocalyptic development, and which are the product of *a visionary, prophetic group* working in the post-exilic period under the inspiration of Deutero-Isaiah. On the other hand we have the book of Haggai, a work which, far from demonstrating apocalyptic tendencies, expresses its eschatological hope in the down to earth business of the construction of the Temple, and which, along with Zechariah 1-8, is the product of *a hierocratic group* working in the same period but along the lines previously set out in Ezekiel 40-48.<sup>1379</sup>

In order to appreciate Hanson's argument it is necessary to concentrate on the two interconnected presuppositions he works with. The first is his undefended assumption that Jewish apocalyptic can best be distinguished from classical prophetism by focusing on the contrasting *eschatological viewpoints* of these two movements. The second is his undefended assumption that this difference in viewpoints was *historic not ideological*: the result of changing circumstances which introduced a split within the community, rather than ideological betrayal on either side.

Hanson takes as a starting point the relationship between pre-exilic prophetism and Jewish apocalyptic. He claims that though previous scholars had managed to come up with a number of aspects which generally distinguish these movements they had been unable to identify one particular characteristic which clearly marked out the basic difference between them. Hanson considers that eschatology provides the best distinguishing feature. However, I find this rather lame since he himself admits that there are some apocalyptic works which betray no interest in eschatology.<sup>1380</sup>

In order to pinpoint the disparity between these movements Hanson defines prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology thus:

Prophetic eschatology ... [is] a religious perspective which focuses on the prophetic announcement to the nation of the divine plans for Israel and the world which the prophet had witnessed unfolding in the divine council and which he translates into terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality.

Apocalyptic eschatology... [is] a religious perspective which focuses on the disclosure to the elect of the cosmic vision of Yahweh's sovereignty – especially as it relates to this acting to deliver his faithful – which disclosure the visionaries have largely ceased to translate into terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality.<sup>1381</sup>

<sup>1378</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II*, tr. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) pp201ff.

<sup>1379</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 174

<sup>1380</sup> 'The present study focuses upon *one* strand which can be seen running at the heart of many of the so-called apocalyptic works, the strand of apocalyptic eschatology.' Hanson, *Dawn* p. 7.

<sup>1381</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 11.

Is Hanson being deliberately devious, I wonder, in adopting an eschatological approach which favours a *religious* rather than a *political* analysis of these biblical texts?<sup>1382</sup> Such an approach inevitably introduces an ambiguity into his work which he never attempts to dispel by defining exactly what he means by a religious perspective. One thing, however, cannot be denied: that he goes out of his way to try and sideline ideology. It is not that eschatology, as a religious matter, of itself prohibits the raising of ideological considerations for this isn't the case: see for example Hanson's own contrast between the priestly hierarchs' *conservative* or *status quo* realised eschatology and the prophetic movement's *revolutionary* future, apocalyptic eschatology. No, Hanson's deliberate downplaying of ideology is achieved rather more subtly and understanding how it is done will require all our attention.

Hanson's approach is based on an idea long treasured by liberal, biblical scholars: the notion of 'holding in tension' or, alternatively, of 'achieving a proper balance' between one's utopic vision of how things could/should be and the actual practicalities of the situation.<sup>1383</sup> It is important to understand that the crucial aspect of this scenario is that being on the side of the angels involves a *technical* achievement (keeping a balance or holding a tension) rather than an *ideological* achievement (opening oneself to a certain vision of the world). Using this model Hanson argues that in prophetic eschatology a proper balance and tension was maintained whereas in apocalyptic eschatology it wasn't. In other words, as he sees it, the development of Jewish apocalyptic certainly evidenced a failure; however, the failure was *technical* not *ideological*: the consequences of changing historical circumstance rather than revisionism:

We have sought to make heroes of neither visionaries nor hierocrats, and have posited as the ideal neither an oppressed apocalyptic seer nor a powerful hierocratic leader. Insofar as we dare suggest a model for a position which adequately takes into account the rich visionary dimension of early biblical tradition at the same time as it upholds responsibility to the realm of history and politics, we would suggest that a prophet like Isaiah comes close to the ideal. In his prophecy vision was integrated into politics without thereby losing its normative character. Isaiah, however, lived in a period in which priest and prophet, while often engaged in controversy, were yet able to draw upon the traditions of the same cult and to claim membership in the same nation. The situation which we have studied in the sixth and fifth centuries was different, characterized by a severe split of the continuity into two contending factions and by extreme polarization of the visionary and realistic aspects of biblical faith. The danger attending this development was that the faith of Israel would be divided into a flat theology of expediency on the one hand and a utopian theology of escape on the other, with both lacking the element of tension present in the proclamation of Isaiah, a man of faith living out his career within the field of tension between the vision of Yahweh's Kingdom and a sense of responsibility for his earthly community.<sup>1384</sup>

It seems that Hanson's aim is to try and give due weight to an evident difference which arose in the post-exilic community while discouraging us from analysing it ideologically or discussing it as revisionism: in terms of a 'revolutionary' betrayal of some sort.

What interpretation can one offer, in the face of conflicting messages from Haggai and the visionary of Isaiah 66, one proclaiming God's will that the temple be built, the other rejecting

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<sup>1382</sup> I presume that in speaking of 'religious perspectives' Hanson is saying something more than that the members of these movements expressed themselves in pre-scientific representational language which, of course, is obviously true.

<sup>1383</sup> e.g. Brueggemann's 'within the fray' and 'above the fray' duality. See above p 266.

<sup>1384</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 410.

the temple plan and condemning the practices and leaders of the temple cult? According to methods of interpretation prevalent in the past, we are faced with unpleasant alternatives: either deny that such internal polemic exists in the Old Testament and attempt to harmonize the "apparent" discrepancies or try to establish the truth of one of the claims over against the other(s). We suggest that this approach has elevated the concept of biblical revelation to an indefensibly high level of abstraction. Revelation in the Bible is not the announcement of immutable truths, but is a record of Yahweh's involvement in the crises and struggles of his human community. The theological thrust of the Old Testament cannot be grasped by dealing with words extracted from their community setting, for Yahweh's will breaks through to the faithful not in isolation from the struggles of the Jewish community, and not on one side of the struggle rather than the other, but amidst such struggle. For as different factions in Israel contend with each other, they are reaching for the God who is at once too near and too far to be encompassed by any theological system, too much present in the midst of his people and yet too remote to be comprehended by any individual. Revelation thus is found not in an unbroken progression stemming from the creation to the eschaton, but occurs in a dialectical movement often marked by tension and dissension, frequently tottering between the extremes of desperate escape into the repose of the cosmic vision and myopic preoccupation with the day-to-day control of cult and community.<sup>1385</sup>

Initially on reading Henson's book I was under the impression that he was putting forward his tension model as a way of understanding the Bible *on its own terms*: as an historical text. This would have been perfectly feasible had he argued that the model encapsulates the thinking of its final editors and explains why they decided to include works written from various ideological perspectives. It would have been a difficult argument to defend, of course, because (as we shall see in the next chapter) the tension model itself is the product of liberalism and constitutes a bourgeois pattern of thought which would have been a hideous anachronism in *any* ancient text. However, all of this is beside the point because, to do him justice, Henson does not advance such an argument. He puts forward his tension model rather as a way in which modern Christians *on their own religious terms* can see the Bible with its conflicting viewpoints as a unity, since this is something which he and they agree faith demands:

For the modern individual or group which confesses that the Old Testament records the self-disclosure of divine will within Israel's history as a nation, either such inner-community strife and polarization must be ignored, or God's self-disclosure must be discerned precisely within the field of tension between the vision of the transcendent divine order and the Israelite's sense of solidarity with his community's institutions and practices. While the latter alternative raises many questions which must be addressed anew by thoughtful persons of faith (e.g., the meaning of canon, the sense in which a unity of scripture can be ascertained), it does resonate with certain aspects of the modern religious person's experience: God is the unconditioned and is beyond facile comprehension by the human mind; the religious life therefore involves struggle, and can even be characterized as a dialectic of faith.<sup>1386</sup>

I have to admit that when I came to realise what Henson was actually advocating here it quite took the wind out of my sails. For his argument clearly constitutes a escape from the public arena of scientific history into a private religious domain where, given that

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<sup>1385</sup> Henson, *Dawn* p. 411. See also 1) His argument that the criticisms made on both sides should not be taken at face value but should be seen as largely hyperbole and distortion: *Dawn*, p. 260-1, 2) His argument that the obvious polarisation evidenced in the texts should not be viewed as being between diametrical opposites involving us in making value judgement about them: *Dawn*, 281, 3) His argument that these polarities, although certainly involving self interest, were not based, on either side, simply on baser instincts: *Dawn*, 281-2. Using such arguments Henson banishes ideology and makes everyone right as well as wrong!

<sup>1386</sup> Henson, *Dawn*, p. 260.

religious statements can no more be falsified than they can be proved, all proposals become unassailable. His particular line is that we should read these texts using ‘a dialectic of faith’ – which is to say a religious model based on a modern, liberal thought-form – because, as he sees it, there is simply *no other way of viewing the Bible as an unity*, as faith insists. He is wrong in this regard, of course, because there is a perfectly good way of viewing the Bible as a unity without having to abandon the constraints of scientific history. I have called it the ‘revolution’/ revisionism model and it involves an embrace of ideology rather than a sidelining of it. That said, the most important point we have to make at this stage is that *insofar as Hanson retreats into religion we are obliged to ignore what he has to say since our concern is with the empirical evidence found in the Bible for things that actually happened and thoughts people entertained and not with theological speculation which individuals now choose to weave about it*. However, not everything about Hanson’s tension model constitutes religion and that is our problem because he chooses to run scientific and religious conversations together, which makes what he says difficult to disentangle. However, since we have given ourselves the task of tracking his findings we are obliged to try and do so, but we shall have to keep a wary eye on the way in which his religious intent skews his historical analysis.

Hanson’s insistence on the necessity of maintaining a proper dialectical relationship between visions and practicalities *sounds* very religious when he writes about it as ‘God’s self-disclosure’. But this really isn’t the case since from time immemorial politicians of every description have had to take such a dialectical principle on board.<sup>1387</sup> How then does it relate to our own ‘revolution/revisionism model? What we find is that in the case of the Bible the *vision* is Israel’s ‘revolutionary’ understanding of herself as the servant of the god of the marginals and the *practicalities* are the strategic difficulties she encountered in actually living out this servanthood. In other words, using our model, ideological considerations are seen as dominant in both the vision and the practicalities domains, something which is not true in Hanson’s usage where, for quite extraneous reasons (the need for a faith which can embrace a limited number of conflicting political aspirations i.e. liberalism and conservatism), ideological considerations are systematically sidelined if not completely ignored. One has to sympathise with Hanson, for sidelining ideology is not an easy thing to do in the case of the Bible and he only manages to achieve it to a certain degree by talking very blandly about the phenomenon of vision, concentrating instead on the dialectic established by the vision/practicalities, balancing exercise. For example he speaks of Yahweh as present, hidden within the dialectic, but he is careful never to speak about him as present in the vision itself which he refers to only vaguely and generally as ‘the cosmic order’ or ‘the static world view of myth’. Indeed, as we have already seen above<sup>1388</sup> he even goes so far sometimes as to implicitly deny Yahweh’s presence in Israel’s vision by rejecting the notion of biblical revelation as ‘the announcement of immutable

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<sup>1387</sup> Exponents of the tension model may well argue that there is a difference between being obliged to accept this dialectic, which politicians have always done, and embracing it willingly which is something of an art, it is true, but this can only be seen as a matter of degree.

<sup>1388</sup> See the quotation on p. 423-424 above.

truth'.<sup>1389</sup> This is surprising because normally one defines an utopic vision by spelling out its ideological content as a range of immutable truths – in the parlance of the ancient world by describing the character of the god who is seen as granting it – and it is this ideological character (or colour) which produces in acolytes the desire to find a way of realising appropriate behaviour, having due regard to the practicalities of the actual situation. Of course Hanson doesn't deny that the post-exilic conflict between the hierocratic and visionary groups was ideological. Indeed following Karl Mannheim he describes the mentality of the former as 'ideological' and that of the latter as 'utopian'.<sup>1390</sup> What he does object to, however, is that we should try to discover the truth concerning these disputes by conducting an ideological analysis for, as he maintains somewhat grandly, God as the unconditioned (i.e. as ultimate reality) cannot readily be perceived by any human mind!<sup>1391</sup> Here again of course he retreats beyond our reach into a private religious world and we are left contemplating his unexpected departure from our scientific-history conversation with two major questions on our minds:

1. Does he really believe that for a community the only thing of importance is that it should deal dialectically with the practicalities of its situation and that the ideological *quality* of its utopic vision (generally spoken of in Marxist language as being either progressive or reactionary) whether conservative, liberal, socialist, communist or fascist, is of no real concern?
2. Does he really think that biblical revelation has nothing to do with the perceived character of Yahweh and *only* occurs in the dialectical process of living, making mistakes, viewing the consequences and then adjusting?

I find it hard to credit that he can find either of these propositions acceptable yet they seem to be understandings naturally generated by his use of the tension model. Having said that I can perfectly understand his advocacy of a model which relegates ideology to the sidelines. For if as a civilisation clerk (university professor) you can persuade yourself that life is not about having regard to eternal truth, and that being on the side of the angels simply consists of maintaining a proper balance when conducting a dialectical exercise, then you have nothing to fear from the Bible's wickedly destabilising assertion *that righteousness means taking active steps to live in radical solidarity and ever being prepared to wave your privileges goodbye.*

One pernicious effect of Hanson's preoccupation with a faith that is capable of embracing most, even if not all, political persuasions (as a good bourgeois I presume he would not wish to include fascism or communism) is that it inevitably blunts his analytical tools. Take, for example, the word revolution which in modern analytical

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<sup>1389</sup> However, he finds himself speaking of 'the revolutionary element which was always an essential ingredient in genuine prophecy' as 'a vision of Yahweh's order of mercy and justice' which sounds to me something closely approximating to ideology's dreaded immutable truths. Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 247.

<sup>1390</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 213. In accepting 'utopian' as an adequate description of the prophetic visionaries' mentality Hanson does not mean to deny its ideological nature. The word utopian simply signifies that prophetic visionaries' ideology remained yet to be realised. In other words the hierocrats' ideology was that of a realised utopia whereas the visionaries' ideology was a yet to be realised utopia.

<sup>1391</sup> See quotation p. 412 above.



discussion is generally used to describe social upheavals brought about by organising class interests. Hanson seems at times to be willing to use the word in this manner:

In the realm of religious institutions, as in the realm of politics, the polarization (in the post-exilic community) tends to develop primarily between two forces, the one embodied in the ruling classes and devoted to preservation of the former institutional structures, the other found among the alienated and oppressed and bent on revolution leading to change of the status quo. The models to which each turns in the search for a basis for restoration is intimately related to the social status of each group. The ruling classes, because of their vested interest in the institutional structures of the immediate past, construct a program for restoration on the basis of those recently disrupted structures so as to preserve their position of supremacy. The alienated and oppressed classes look to the more distant past for models which call into question the position of power claimed by the ruling classes, and readily adhere to prophetic figures calling for revolutionary change on the basis of such archaic models.<sup>1392</sup>

However, the trouble is that his argument at this point naturally depends on seeing these so called ‘archaic models’ to which the prophetic revolutionaries turned for inspiration *as being in themselves revolutionary*. This is a problem for Hanson since he can only recognise (or only permits himself to see) in Israel’s early ‘Amorite’ beginnings some vague nomadic notions.<sup>1393</sup> This means that he is obliged to base the prophetic revolution idea *on the development of Israelite prophecy itself*:

It is difficult to overemphasize the revolutionary nature of the innovation effected by the prophetic movement. In a world which viewed divine activity primarily on the cosmic level, and which looked upon the flux and change of the historical realm as something to be overcome through the ritual of the cult, prophetic faith began to speak of a God who effected the salvation of his people precisely in the flux and change of history.<sup>1394</sup>

What we see here is Hanson using the word revolution not to mean *class upheaval* but rather *the sudden appearance of religious dialectics as an altogether novel way of thinking and operating*. Hanson elucidates this novelty by describing it as *the introduction of conditionality* which the prophets employed to keep Israel’s kings in spiritual check:

Prophecy had arisen in Israel as an independent, spiritual check on kingship. Haggai and Zechariah ... in giving Yahweh's unquestioned sanction to a particular human institution, and to particular priestly and royal officials ... were giving up the revolutionary element which was always an essential ingredient in genuine prophecy, an element stemming from a vision of Yahweh's order of mercy and justice which called into question every human institution and every human office bearer.<sup>1395</sup>

Here class interests have disappeared altogether to be replaced by revolution understood as a religious concept which relativises every human value and aspiration. Thus ideology goes out of the window along with its relativised values and we are left with the religious dialectical process standing on its own for what its worth – not much in my opinion! The only exceptions seem to be the values of ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’ which have somehow miraculously survived though in what sort of state it is difficult to tell since as far as I can determine *human values like mercy and justice only get their essential colouring from a defining ideology!*

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<sup>1392</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 212.

<sup>1393</sup> See Hanson *Dawn*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>1394</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 18.

<sup>1395</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 247.

It is easy to mock Henson's attempt to conduct a religious and a scientific discussion in tandem. However, the fact is that if you purge his analysis of his extraneous religious interpretations and then apply the results to our own 'revolution'/revisionism scenario you find everything he says making perfect sense. For of course the prophets looked back to a revolutionary 'archaic model' though this was not class-based but represented a solidarity with the marginal outcasts (radical solidarity in my terms). And of course this backwards regard involved the prophets in dialectical thinking, as defenders of this 'revolutionary' tradition, since revolutionary thinking, whether bourgeois, proletarian or marginal, is *necessarily* dialectical; only history *can* vindicate a revolution. This is in strong contrast to conservative, authoritarian thinking which, as Henson rightly points out, as a *status quo* performance vindicates itself. Having said all this in defence of Hanson's 'purged' analysis it is important once again to emphasise that the consequence of removing his extraneous religious interpretations is to replace ideology once again at the centre of discussion.

One further pernicious effect of Hanson's 'dialectic of faith' model is the way in which in its analysis of historical situations, it sets a value on *the practical* as over against *that which is viewed as having intrinsic worth*. Henson's view of the post-exilic prophetic visionary movement is that though they may have had tradition on their side they were basically unrealistic in trying to foist their visions on the post-exilic community. In doing so they showed themselves to be, as he himself puts it, 'an idealistic or even fanatical band eagerly longing for the glorification of Zion, and confident that Yahweh would soon act to accomplish what men alone could not'.<sup>1396</sup> Clearly Hanson's judgement is entirely based on his own estimation of what was possible in the post-exilic community, given the circumstances. So the question which intrigues me is this: What makes him think that people like himself are the ones best placed to decide on such matters? I remember my brother on one occasion arguing against me that the biblical message couldn't possibly be that people had to be prepared to give up their privileges. He took this stance, of course, believing that such a demand was, at least for people like himself, entirely *impracticable* and it is not difficult to understand his point. However, the fact is that it is not a simple matter to determine what is practical in a given situation. For not only is it a matter of personal judgement but it is also a matter which, in the final analysis, can only be judged within a horizonless context of political faith where it is not permissible to impose geographical or historical limits on one's vision. For example, in 1939 a Polish or Belgian citizen could have argued with some justification that it was impractical for their countrymen to resist the Nazi onslaught. However, viewing things from our wider historical and geographic perspective we might possibly now beg to differ, even while wondering whether our comfortable position gives us the right to judge at all. We will find this question, of the viewpoint of the one who makes a judgement about what is practical in a given context, raised to the *n*<sup>th</sup> degree when we come to consider Jesus' contribution, for clearly in his generation no one apart from himself considered that his strategy was practical, yet ever since the planet has ceaselessly reverberated to his quite extraordinary political achievement.<sup>1397</sup>

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<sup>1396</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 72.

<sup>1397</sup> I am aware my suggestion that Jesus' achievement was political will shock many people. They will even tell me that if it *was* political it was hardly extraordinary. However, if you believe that his achievement must be measured by the extent to which he shamed civilisation into seeing what it was

It seems to me, therefore, that in reporting what the Bible says we should refrain from imposing on it our own judgements about what was practical and impractical given the circumstances and instead concentrate on what the texts actually advocate in the light of the Bible's own 'revolution'/ revisionism pattern.

## 2. *Jewish apocalyptic according to Christopher Rowland*

Rowland basically accepts Hanson's thesis that the post exilic period witnessed a division within the Jewish community between a hierocratic group who managed to seize power and a visionary prophetic group who found themselves excluded from influence. However, he is equally critical of attempts to see Jewish Apocalyptic as a movement brought into being by a particular historical situation<sup>1398</sup> as of attempts to define the movement itself by the way in which it employed eschatology.<sup>1399</sup> For Rowland it is misguided in the first instance to try to localise Jewish apocalyptic either historically or geographically. For, properly understood, apocalyptic is nothing more than the name given to an ancient form of communication whereby people endeavoured to talk about what they believed was really happening beneath the surface, by speaking of their personal visions and dreams as heavenly revelations – a practice which was geographically and historically widespread in the ancient world.<sup>1400</sup> In a similar manner he believes it is a mistake to try and define apocalyptic in terms of its subject matter for, as he sees it, the word itself designates a specific linguistic technology<sup>1401</sup> rather than a particular use to which this technology was commonly put.<sup>1402</sup>

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doing in trashing human beings, as I do, then it was clearly political, and momentous to boot, even though it was not the sort of political achievement we spend most of our time contemplating.  
<sup>1398</sup> 'What we are faced with in apocalyptic, therefore, is a type of religion whose distinguishing feature is a belief in direct revelation of the things of God which was mediated through dream, vision or divine intermediary. It has many parallels in contemporary pagan religion and throughout the history of religion. In the Hellenistic world there existed, what Martin Hengel has called, a quest for 'higher wisdom through revelation','' which has left the marks of its influence in various literary remains. The climax of this quest is to be found in the various gnostic systems of the second century where the salvation of the individual is brought about through the apprehension of hidden knowledge of the nature of reality.' Rowland, *Open*, p.20.

<sup>1399</sup> 'Most attempts to define apocalyptic do in fact indicate that there are certain key elements which typify the apocalyptic eschatology: the doctrine of the two ages, a pessimistic attitude towards the present, supernatural intervention as the only basis for redemption, and an urgent expectation of a dawn of a new age. In our attempt to ascertain the essence of apocalyptic no place was found for eschatology in our definition. Perhaps this may have caused some surprise, especially in the light of the close connection which is said to exist between apocalyptic and eschatological ideas. The omission was not because it was considered that eschatology has no part to play in the apocalypses; that would be the reverse of the truth. But its presence in them is not their most distinctive feature, nor does it deserve to become the focus of attention in the study of apocalyptic to the exclusion of the other secrets which the apocalypses claim to reveal.' Rowland, *Open*, p.26.

<sup>1400</sup> 'The point should not be missed ... that apocalyptic is one way in which Judaism participated in the *Zeitgeist* of late antiquity.' Rowland, *Open*, p.20.

<sup>1401</sup> '... all would recognise that apocalyptic derives from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, a word which is used to describe the disclosure of supernatural persons or secrets, ...' Rowland, *Open*, p. 56

<sup>1402</sup> '... we ought not to think of apocalyptic as being primarily a matter of either a particular literary type or distinctive subject-matter, though common literary elements and ideas may be ascertained. Rather, the common factor is the belief that God's will can be discerned by means of a mode of revelation which unfolds directly the hidden things of God. To speak of apocalyptic, therefore, is to concentrate on the"

I have to say that I find Rowland's appreciation of apocalyptic as a language (which we can see as operating on a par and in conjunction with other languages such as allegory and myth) highly enlightening. For not only does it provide a credible explanation for my prejudice against it – my failure to appreciate its *representational* nature – but it also makes it possible, if not easy, for me to take the writings themselves seriously for the first time.

If apocalyptic is understood as being an ideologically neutral linguistic technique I cannot object to Rowland's definition of it, as 'the revelation of divine mysteries through visions'<sup>1403</sup> because I find the idea of God having favourites, to whom he reveals hidden truths, ideologically indefensible. *For 'God having favourites' is not, after all, what the definition implies.* All that is being asserted is that in apocalyptic writings people used their personal dreams or visions to express their understanding of what was really happening in the world. It is true, of course, that the use of such a technology involves authoritative statements of how things stand but this is a characteristic of any expression of personal opinion. As Chris Rowland himself told me, no one in the ancient world would simply have taken it for granted that if a person had a dream or a vision that meant that the content of the dream or vision had to be true and that the dream itself was divinely inspired. It was well understood that such things had to be tested, for example by seeing whether the ideological content of the dream squared with the character of the god it was supposed to come from. What this means is that if we wish to be able to differentiate between 'revolutionary' and revisionist tendencies in these texts we are going to have to keep our prejudices firmly in check since our natural inclination will be to see revisionism everywhere, even where in fact none exists.

Paradoxically, or so it may seem, Rowland's redefinition of apocalyptic as a neutral technique actually increases the need to determine the ideological nature of these writings, it now being clear that the technology itself, as 'colourless', is capable of expressing *any* conceivable political notion. However, though Rowland, in his analysis of Jewish apocalyptic, does highlight some ideological considerations it does not appear to me that he works systematically. Since I can detect in his writings no evidence that, like almost all of his colleagues, he is motivated by a desire either to dumb down or to misrepresent the biblical ideology, I am forced to conclude it is because he lacks the necessary equipment to analyse them adequately. It is clear, for instance, that he does not work with the 'revolution'/revisionism model – a major drawback – and that he employs the term ideology in the old Marxist sense in which it is taken as denoting the self-justifying ideas making up the worldview of a society's ruling class. The trouble with such a definition is that it ruins the word as an analytical tool by the decision to use it as a pejorative description which singles out the dominant class for criticism. The fact is, of course, that as a result of consciousness all human beings possess worldviews made up of self-justifying notions which they quite naturally defend and export during the conduct of their everyday lives. This being the case it is misleading for everyone, including the user, to employ a word that gives the

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theme of the direct communication of the heavenly mysteries in all their diversity.' Rowland, *Open*, p.14.

<sup>1403</sup> Rowland, *Open* p.70.

impression that while the ruling class operates with a dreaded ideology other sections of the community operate more modestly with worldviews or religions, especially if there is any suggestion that these remain uncoloured by self-servingly political ideas.<sup>1404</sup> The simple fact is that in order to analyse human conduct it is necessary to be able to speak not only about the worldviews from which people operate but also to be able to identify the political colour with which such worldviews are quite inevitably tinged. We do this quite naturally in everyday life by referring to ‘pink’ left-wing and ‘blue’ right-wing tendencies; however, biblical historians seem to think it inappropriate to use such language when speaking of the Bible. In this way they give the impression that, for some unexplained reason,<sup>1405</sup> they still consider the Bible to be a politics-free zone – though this is not an accusation I can level at Chris Rowland. Of course it could be argued with some justification that it is inappropriate to speak of biblical writers as showing left-wing or right-wing leanings. For to do so situates the Bible within a civilisation context of warring classes and we already know that the Bible, at least in its ‘revolutionary’ tradition, expresses no class affiliation, standing as it does solidly behind the socially excluded. However, such a criticism could hardly be made of our endeavour to extend the definition of the word ideology to cover the self-serving political colour which *every human group*, and not simply *the ruling class*, bestows on its world view (consciously or not). This is especially true given the fact that this is precisely the way in which the word is now commonly used.

### *Approaching the Post-Exilic Texts*

I find it impossible to find fault with Hanson’s basic thesis that the post-exilic texts bear witness to a struggle between a prophetic group building on the work of Second Isaiah on the one hand and a hierocratic group seeking to realise Ezekiel’s rebuilt-temple project on the other. Indeed, it is one of those insights which, once acquired, makes you wonder why you hadn’t realised it yourself long ago. Of course the reason why readers of the Bible have not generally been aware of this situation is that, though the final editors of the Bible were clearly intent on including texts with conflicting voices, it would not have served their purpose to draw attention to the fact. Indeed, their interests lay in covering it up ... without, of course, damaging the texts in doing so. We have already come across a very similar phenomenon in Genesis which includes ideologically conflicting contributions: texts from the Yahwist (J) and texts provided by a later contributor/editor (P) designed to control the Yahwist’s out-of-control, god-of-the-marginals ideology. So I have to express my thanks to Hanson for bringing this matter to my attention and recommend others to verify it for themselves.

Accepting Hanson’s thesis concerning the development of a significant split in post-exilic Judean society, it is immediately obvious that this division did not come about simply for strategic or personal reasons but that it was truly ideological, involving on both sides what we have described as accusations of Category 1 sin. For not only are the complaints from the side of the prophetic visionaries expressed in a polemical

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<sup>1404</sup> I do not believe that Rowland himself falls into this trap. However, his terminology makes such an inference all too possible.

<sup>1405</sup> Presumably because it is still taken as read that you should not mix the Bible with politics.

tone<sup>1406</sup> involving the charge of blasphemy<sup>1407</sup> and of abandoning Yahweh's law<sup>1408</sup> but also the culprits' misconduct is represented as the worst kind of disgusting Canaanite cultic practices<sup>1409</sup> flagged up by the sex-marker<sup>1410</sup> and judged as meriting the death penalty.<sup>1411</sup> In short these prophetic writers couldn't possibly have made it any clearer that they saw the conflict as being concerned with ideological betrayal (revisionism) while the hierocrats for their part were not slow to reply in kind when stung into a rejoinder.<sup>1412</sup> Hanson recognises some of these features in his analysis, as I have shown in the notes below, though he overlooks the points about Law-breaking and the death penalty and tries to claim that the use of the sex-marker was somehow novel, which is absurd. However, he studiously misses the 'revolution'/revisionism aspect of this ideological struggle by passing off these polemical features as the kind of hyperbole and distortion which naturally occur in communal disputes.<sup>1413</sup>

Given this situation of ideological struggle within the post-exilic community – which Henson deliberately refuses to see but which the biblical writers themselves could not possibly have made more evident – it now becomes necessary for us to do the very thing which Henson went out of his way to council us against. We must conduct an ideological examination of the work of the disciples of second Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14) and Ezekiel (Haggai, Zechariah 1-8, Ezra and Nehemiah) using our god-of-the-marginals 'revolution'/revisionism approach to see if we can identify any ideological betrayal taking place on either side. However, I must immediately make it clear that what I mean by an ideological examination is not a full investigation of every salient idea in the texts but simply an identification of their political colour.<sup>1414</sup> For our concern does not stem from an *antiquarian* interest in the Bible motivated by a curiosity concerning ancient ideas. Nor does it stem from a *scientific* interest in the way

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<sup>1406</sup> 'In studying the biblical documents of the sixth century, we thus face two traditions emphasizing different facets of Israel's religious experience and, in a period of crisis, diverging increasingly from each other amidst bitter polemic.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 260.

<sup>1407</sup> 'Stated tersely, what were heralded as signs of the fulfilment of Yahweh's promises to his people by the hierocrats were condemned as defilements of true religion by the visionaries. Coming at the climax of a bitter struggle for control of the temple, the identification of the accession of two representatives of the hierocratic party and of the completion of their cultic shrine with the arrival of the eschaton appeared to the visionaries as a blatant instance of blasphemy which they compared with the most crass of pagan cultic practices.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 261.

<sup>1408</sup> e.g. Is 59. 3-4, 7-8.

<sup>1409</sup> Commenting on Isaiah 65. 3-5 Hanson writes: 'A more biting attack on the central tenet of that tradition can hardly be imagined than equating their special sanctity with paganizing practices. ... The judgement on the cult of the priestly group could not be more unequivocal. Hanson, *Dawn*, 146-9.

<sup>1410</sup> 'The author of this oracle (Is. 56.9 – 57.13) departs from traditional language in verses 7-10 to create an ingenious and sarcastic image of his own to carry further his attack on the defiled cult. The switch to the third feminine singular, far from being an indication of a new unit, is dictated by the new image being developed, that of the prostitute (= the apostates) and her bed (= their temple). To be sure, the metaphor of Israel as the faithless harlot was borrowed from tradition, but the manner in which it is developed is shockingly new.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 198.

<sup>1411</sup> Is 65. 6-7, 11-12. Only ideological sin merited the death penalty.

<sup>1412</sup> See for example Ezekiel 44. 10, 12.

<sup>1413</sup> e.g. Cain verses Abel, a story which, including no sex-marker, is flagged up by the Yahwist as a non-ideological dispute.

<sup>1414</sup> As per my own definition of the word ideology.

in which civilisation developed.<sup>1415</sup> Rather our interest is *political and ethical*, having to do with the effects which certain key ideas, dealing with the way in which human power and creativity is properly expressed, have on human thinking. For our motivation, believe it or not, is to actually *learn* from these texts, however naive that may seem to some.

The fact is that the key political/ethical ideas which, in our civilisation, habitually colour world-views – such as ‘hierarchical-authority’, ‘liberty-and-equality’, ‘class-solidarity’ and ‘radical-solidarity’ – do not seem to be overly effected by social development. The truth seems to be that though a little ideological progress can possibly be detected in the course of our civilisation’s history the idea of hierarchical (or centrarchial) authority still abounds; and though some advance has been made towards a classless society bourgeois ideas of competition are far from eradicated; and though the idea of radical solidarity has certainly been about for at least four thousand years it appears to be no more accepted by the proletariat than it was by other, former, ruling classes. So while Marx may have been correct in identifying changes in our civilisation they manifestly come about, at least from our point of view, excruciatingly slowly and when it comes to the biblical idea of radical solidarity one has to wonder if any progress has been achieved. For just as much as ever it is habitually written off as an idealistic pipedream by those who see themselves as guardians of civilisation.<sup>1416</sup> I conclude, therefore, that in dealing with this crucial idea all human individuals operate, by and large, on a par. This being the case the biblical god-of-the-marginals tradition, which tells the history of this amazing concept, stands in no danger of becoming dated. Indeed it will presumably *always* provide the principle source of revelation (of the unmasking sort) for marginal-ideology disciples so long as our civilisation endures and even possibly long thereafter, depending on how our civilisation ends. And let me make it clear that I am not here staking out a religious claim which, being unverifiable, historians can safely ignore but rather an ideological claim which they can certainly verify should they choose to do so.

*An ideological examination of the post-exilic hierocratic and prophetic traditions*  
In conducting this examination we will use the knowledge we have acquired about the Hebrew god-of-the-marginals ideology to pose a series of questions regarding these texts. Our objective in doing this will be to suss out just how far the texts exhibit a true ‘revolutionary’ approach or, to put the matter the other way around, just how far they demonstrate revisionist traits. In this exercise we will be entrusting ourselves to Hanson’s analytical skills, conscious that he is highly unlikely to invent anything that we, because of our ‘revolutionary’ perspective, want to find.

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<sup>1415</sup> Motivated by a desire to know from whence we came so that we can feel good about ourselves and where we are going?

<sup>1416</sup> e.g. Hanson who simply cannot accept the idea that third Isaiah might just be offering hard, pragmatic, ideological criticism ‘...a comparison of Isaiah 60-62 with Ezekiel 40-48 strongly suggests that the prophetic community living in the promises of Second Isaiah here set out their ideal program for the restoration of Zion.’ Hanson, *Dawn* p, 74.

1. As far as structures are concerned do the texts describe the community where their ideology reigns as inclusive or exclusive?

We have analysed ancient Near Eastern civilisation and found it to be characteristically centrarchal, authoritarian and exclusive, in strong contrast with the early Hebrew community which we found to be loosely organised, non-authoritarian and inclusive by nature. This being the case it seems only right that we should now begin our analysis of post-exilic Israelite society by asking how, on the one hand, the victorious priestly community organised itself as the realised eschatological Kingdom of God; and how, on the other hand, the vanquished prophetic visionaries envisaged the yet to be realised eschatological Kingdom of God which they believed would see their opponents vanquished and themselves rescued? According to what Hanson relates the picture seems very clear. This is how he describes the contrasting programs stemming on the one hand from second Isaiah and on the other from Ezekiel:

These contrasting mentalities are brought into sharp focus when one compares the corresponding details within the two programs. (1) The leaders of the prophetic community are Peace and Righteousness (Is 60:17b), those of the hierocracy are the various officials of the priestly and civil hierarchies, headed by the high priest and the prince. (2) The promise of the visionary is that *the whole nation* will be named the priests of Yahweh, the ministers of our God" (Is 61:6); the realists carefully regulate: "... mark well those who may be admitted to the temple and all those who are to be excluded from the sanctuary. . .; [the Levites] shall not come near to me, to serve me as priest. . ." (Ez 44:5, 13); "...the sons of Zadok...alone among the sons of Levi may come near to the Lord to minister to him" (Ez 40:46; cf. Ez 44:15). (3) The visionary exults, "Your people shall all be righteous. ." (Is 60:21); "They will be called 'The Holy People'. ." (Is 62:12); the realist meticulously explains that holiness is reserved for the few and that it must be safeguarded by ordinances: when the Zadokites leave the inner court, "they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering, and lay them in the holy chambers; and they shall put on other garments, lest they communicate holiness to the people with their garments. . . .They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common..." (Ez 44:19, 23). A special holy place is designated where the priests are to boil the offerings, "in order not to bring them out into the outer court and so communicate holiness to the people" (Ez 46:20).<sup>1417</sup>

Here again in his analysis of Isaiah 60 – 62 we find him heavily underlining the democratic and inclusive nature of the future Kingdom of God as predicted by the prophetic visionaries:

Another way in which the collective adaptation of Israel's prophetic heritage manifests itself in the early post-exilic period is in the democratisation of all of the traditional offices. In the section introduced by the prophetic commission (61:4-11), we first hear of the physical rebuilding of Zion and then are told about the priests who will officiate in the restored community: the people would be named "priests of Yahweh," which represents an astonishing democratisation of the formerly exclusive sacerdotal office and its amalgamation with the prophetic office producing a symbiosis reminiscent of the career of Moses. The needs of these prophet-priests would be supplied by foreigners (vv. 5-6); their relationship with Yahweh would be secured by an everlasting covenant. and sealed by the fulfilment of the ancient patriarchal promises (vv. 7-9). In a remarkable adaptation of ancient promises which resists being limited to any exclusive tradition – even the royal symbols are democratised and applied to the people (62:3) – we recognize the efforts of a new reform group consisting of diverse elements to establish their program as normative for the entire nation.<sup>1418</sup>

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<sup>1417</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p, 72-3.

<sup>1418</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p, 67-8. See also *Dawn* p, 92: 'In this lament (Is 63-64.11), as in Isaiah 65, Second Isaiah's enigmatic figure of the servant is further democratized to apply to the faithful within Israel (63:17).



Here, in contrast, in his analysis of Haggai and Zechariah we find him underlining the authoritarian and exclusivist nature of the actual Kingdom of God as set up by the priestly hierocrats:

After the appeal for popular support had been made by Haggai and Zechariah and the temple reconstruction had been completed, the Zadokites seemed to return to the exclusive view that in the new temple there was room only for their own priestly party. Therefore, they tolerated no other priestly elements in their revised program of restoration and moved to take over the entire priesthood. It is the task of this section to consider several parts of Ezekiel where this attempted Zadokite takeover is reflected.<sup>1419</sup>

This is how he finally summarises the contrast, using a comparison between Zechariah 14 and Isaiah 56. 1-8:

This democratising and universalising of participation in temple sacrifice and celebration again stand in marked contrast to the narrow exclusiveness of the hierocratic group, even as it accords well with the tolerant spirit of the visionary program of restoration, according to which "your people shall all be righteous," and "you will be named the priests of Yahweh, ministers of our God" (60:21a; 61:6a).<sup>1420</sup>

Of course, in these quotations Hanson constantly seeks to downplay the ideological character of these contrasting programmes. He achieves this in part by subtly suggesting that the priestly hierarchs had a *narrow* outlook and that the prophetic visionaries were *reformists* endowed with a *tolerant* spirit.<sup>1421</sup> That said he is clearly not averse to actually showing his hand for he also openly refers to the parties behind the contrasting programmes as *realists* and *visionaries*, appellations designed to identify *contrasting psychological approaches rather than warring ideological stances*.<sup>1422</sup> But if we leave to one side how Hanson *interprets* his findings and concentrate solely on the features he actually identifies in the texts, then the true ideological nature of the contrast is, I would submit, hard if not actually impossible to ignore. Quite clearly Hanson describes the priestly hierocrats as seeking to build a centrarchal, authoritarian and exclusive community and the prophetic visionaries as placing their hopes on a loosely organised, democratic and inclusive future society.

2. As far as religious ideas are concerned do the texts speak about Yahweh in terms of immanence or transcendence?

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<sup>1419</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p, 263. See also *Dawn*, p. 265-6. 'Against this democratising viewpoint is set the hierocratic claim that cultic holiness was reserved for the Aaronide priests. The polarity thus emerging is remarkably similar to that already recognized within the community on the basis of Third Isaiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zechariah, the polarity between a visionary group viewing an Israel like that of Moses' time (Ex 19:6) within which all the people are righteous and are priests of Yahweh (e.g., Is 60:21; 61:6) and a realistic program aimed at creating a holy nation by means of the temple cult and strict separation between the holy priests and the profane people.'

<sup>1420</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 387.

<sup>1421</sup> There is, of course, no indication in the texts that the prophetic visionaries were tolerant – a Greek virtue notably absent in the Bible – or that they were reformists, as Hanson himself spends most of his time elsewhere heavily emphasising. However, here it suits his purpose to pretend that he does not notice this glaring contradiction.

<sup>1422</sup> One can't help thinking that in giving the parties to the dispute such labels Hanson is deliberately ignoring the fact that they simply represent his own politically coloured, liberal judgement as to what was possible in the post-exilic community, given the circumstances.

Using the Yahwist's work we identified the metacosmic-god notion as the ruling religious idea governing the parameters of the Hebrew ideology. Since we discovered that this hugely significant concept of a god without needs was unique<sup>1423</sup> to 'revolutionary' thinking it would seem natural for us to continue our ideological analysis by asking whether it was confirmed or denied by the rival factions composing post-exilic Judean society. This, however, poses something of a problem because, as we have already shown, though the revisionists found it necessary to ditch the 'revolutionary', god-of-the-marginals notion there was no pressure on them to ditch the metacosmic god idea as well since it constituted an even grander notion than the Gentiles' transcendent high-god idea. This means that the only way of distinguishing a 'revolutionary' religious idea in the Bible from a revisionist one is to concentrate on the notion of immanence.

For the Hebrew revolutionaries their metacosmic god, as god of the marginals, was characteristically *immanent* – an ever present, knowable and reachable, vital and powerful spirit operating on their consciences.

For the post-exilic revisionists their metacosmic god, standing alone, was characteristically *transcendent* – an unknowable, mysterious, coercive power, unreachable except by means of the proper hierocratic intermediaries and their performances.

This situation has, of course, been greatly obscured by historians who, like most people today, habitually describe the biblical god as transcendent except when they find him, occasionally, acting immanently! The fact is, however, that our own study has shown that in the biblical texts Yahweh is *never* described as being transcendent if by this it is meant that he behaves like a normal, ancient Near Eastern high god who, though omnipotent and mysteriously unknowable, is full of needs to be satisfied. For even in revisionist texts Yahweh is portrayed as metacosmic: as having no needs. Thus in revisionist texts he is described as being metacosmic (without needs) *and* transcendent (unknowable). In other words his metacosmic nature, like that of the common, ancient Near Eastern high god, is seen as omnipotent and mysterious, thus *precluding imminence*. So on this understanding we will put the post-exilic texts to the test by asking whether they witness to an immanent metacosmic god or to a transcendent metacosmic god.

It is, of course, well known that like all of the ancient Near Eastern texts dealing with high gods, the writings of the priestly hierarchs witness regularly to a religion which is characteristically mysterious and transcendent. Our interest, therefore, focuses on what Hanson has to say about the god of the prophetic visionaries. Though he spends a great deal of time and effort in trying to persuade us that the unique importance of the biblical prophets lay in their 'dialectic of faith' Hanson has remarkably little to say about this religious notion other than the fact that it was dialectical. However, he does on a couple of occasions let slip that he can identify a remarkable note of immanence in the work of the prophetic visionaries. Commenting on Isaiah 57.14-21 he writes:

... there is another dimension of the passage which points toward Third Isaiah, namely, the note that Yahweh, who inhabits eternity, nevertheless dwells "with the oppressed and the lowly" (cf. 66:1-2). This dimension adumbrates a special concern in Third Isaiah for an element within the

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<sup>1423</sup> I use this word perfectly aware of all that it entails.

community which, in contrast to the proud men of position, are variously designated "the humble," "the oppressed," "these who tremble at my word," and "my servants."<sup>1424</sup>

He recognises this very unusual note of present and understandable immanence once again in the work of the prophetic visionaries in Isaiah 63:

Yahweh's presence they uniquely interpreted as "his holy spirit" (vv. 10, 11, 14)...<sup>1425</sup>

Of course Hanson knows nothing of the metacosmic-god notion. However, it can hardly be denied that what he identifies here in these texts is precisely the metacosmic god who, in spite of a stature which dwarfs the transcendent high gods, is characteristically present and knowable to the humble and oppressed. So, once again working only with Hanson's own analysis (and in the teeth of his own religious as opposed to ideological interpretation) we find the priestly hierocrats clearly marked out as revisionist and the priestly visionaries as 'revolutionaries'.

3. As regards history do the texts look back to a 'revolutionary' past or to some former status quo?

We have analysed the biblical texts and identified their underlying pattern as a 'revolution'/revisionism unity. This being the case it seems only right that we should now continue our ideological analysis of post-exilic Israelite society by asking whether the priestly hierarchs or prophetic visionaries showed any signs that they wanted to found their enterprises on a revolutionary past of some description.

Speaking of the bitter struggle which took place in post-exilic society between the prophetic visionaries and the priestly hierarchy Hanson writes:

In the realm of religious institutions, as in the realm of politics, the polarization tends to develop primarily between two forces, the one embodied in the ruling classes and devoted to preservation of the former institutional structures, the other found among the alienated and oppressed and bent on revolution leading to change of the status quo. The models to which each turns in the search for a basis for restoration is intimately related to the social status of each group. The ruling classes, because of their vested interest in the institutional structures of the immediate past, construct a program for restoration on the basis of those recently disrupted structures so as to preserve their position of supremacy. The alienated and oppressed classes look to the more distant past for models which call into question the position of power claimed by the ruling classes, and readily adhere to prophetic figures calling for revolutionary change on the basis of such archaic models.<sup>1426</sup>

From this it would seem that the position in the texts is, once again, perfectly clear. In their day the priestly hierocrats sought to base their victorious enterprise on the pre-exilic status quo: Davidic rulers working hand in glove with Zadokite priests. The vanquished prophetic visionaries, on the other hand, sought to base their future revolutionary enterprise on archaic models which functioned in such a way as to call into question positions of power. Of course it is noticeable that Hanson does not actually label these archaic models as revolutionary for to do so would indicate that the quarrel between the post-exilic prophets and priests was *intrinsically* ideological and

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<sup>1424</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 78.

<sup>1425</sup> Hanson, *Dawn* p. 90.

<sup>1426</sup> Henson, *Dawn*, p. 212.

this is the very thing he seeks to avoid. He admits, of course, that the quarrel was ideological *but only in a secondary manner*. In the main he describes it as resulting from the historical tearing apart of a community containing realist and visionary elements. You can see how Hanson's prejudice in favour of a non-ideological interpretation skews his analysis when he actually tries to describe how these archaic models (new religion) arose:

The *raison d'être* of this new religion contrasted sharply with that of the indigenous religion of the Canaanites. Far from providing cosmic legitimation of the current dynasty and guaranteeing the existing Structures against change, Yahwism celebrated the god who broke the bow of the mighty and placed the poor on thrones. It is not surprising that the political structure emerging from this religious climate was not a monarchy, but a confederacy which reserved the title of king for Yahweh alone, and which provided for Yahweh's rule of his people through charismatic leaders raised on a temporary basis as special needs arose.<sup>1427</sup>

One might be forgiven for thinking that in talking about breaking the bows of the mighty, placing the poor on thrones, and creating a determinedly non-monarchic political structure Hanson is discussing a political revolution of some description but in fact he isn't. What he is talking about is a religious revolution which in some clever way avoids ideology, though I am blessed if I can work out how this is done for everything takes place behind a veil of unknowing! However, if we agree once again to ignore such inappropriate religious interpretation and concentrate instead on what Hanson actually finds in the texts the position becomes patently clear. The priestly hierarchs didn't found their post-exilic enterprise on a revolutionary past. They determinedly constructed it on the pre-exilic centrarchic status quo. This is in sharp contrast with the prophetic visionaries who apparently did build their hopes on a revolutionary past – the Hebrew revolution – and it is precisely this which precipitated them into ideological struggle with their revisionist opponents.

4. As far as strategy is concerned do the texts envisage vindication as to be achieved *reactively* by a 'no guarantees' process of shaming or *proactively* through a 'guaranteed' process of coercive force?

Our own study of the Yahwist's work showed that, in order to find a place for themselves in a world dominated by a multitude of civilisations characteristically blind to their predicament, the marginals adopted a strategy appropriately based on developing strength out of weakness and we identified this unusual reactive strategy as that of shaming. Apparently the Hebrews believed that in having the courage to stand up and demonstrate as a community what it meant to live in radical solidarity they would show up these civilisations and eventually disgrace them into changing their coercive ways. One thing our study drew attention to was the fact that, unlike the alternative proactive strategy adopted by the rest of their world, where reliance was

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<sup>1427</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 14. See also p. 363 'This Jerusalemite, Zadokite-led program was opposed by the visionary group, which harked back especially to archaic traditions of the league in maintaining that the true cult was open to all the people and not restricted to a narrow circle of priestly elite.' And p. 394 'In opposition to the continuity with earlier temple structures characterising the hierocratic group, these visionaries produced a vision dedicated to utter discontinuity with the structures of the past, reaching back for their models instead to ancient myths and archaic narrative traditions.'

placed on building up a community's potential for forcibly getting its own way, exposure by demonstration, by its very nature, proved to be a long term strategy, raising considerable problems for the Hebrews who adopted it. For in the short term the exercise naturally tended to engender hostility towards the community, something which it was ill equipped to endure. This meant that in the short term it was necessary for the 'revolutionary' community to find a way of soaking up this hostility until the shaming process had time to kick in. Given the very unusual nature of the Hebrew's reactive strategy it seems appropriate that we should continue our ideological analysis of the post-exilic texts by determining whether or not they too show signs of this peculiar approach.

In this connection Hanson draws attention to a striking aspect in the writings of the prophetic visionaries concerning the rebuilding the Temple. They described this event as taking place some time in the future, not as a result of the community's own efforts but rather as a consequence of Yahweh's use of foreigners as his instrument.

There follows in 60:10-22 a description of the manner in which the salvation promised in verses 1-9 would occur, forming the first part of a post-exilic program for restoration. Verses 10, 11 and 13 provide for the rebuilding of the walls and the sanctuary, a rebuilding to be carried out by Yahweh himself with the aid of foreigners and their kings.<sup>1428</sup>

Hanson points out that the rebuilding of the Temple occupied a central place in post-exilic discussion about the correct strategy to adopt in order for the community to achieve vindication. Commenting on the perspective of the priestly hierarchs (as represented by Haggai) he writes:

The human endeavour of rebuilding the temple becomes the condition for the arrival of the messianic kingdom, a belief which apparently seemed pagan to some opponents of the hierocratic program as they contrasted it with the classical prophetic view that only an act of Yahweh accompanying the repentance of the people could usher in the eschaton.<sup>1429</sup>

So according to Hanson the position is this. The hierocratic texts show that the priestly Zadokites believed that the proper way to achieve Israel's vindication was to rebuild the Temple and commence the cult which Ezekiel had so carefully described; whereas the prophetic texts show that these visionaries saw this priestly strategy as a regressive step. For them the correct approach already set out by Second Isaiah was to leave the business of the rebuilding of the Temple to Yahweh and to concentrate instead on correcting the mistakes which had necessitated the destruction of the first Temple. As Hanson himself succinctly puts it:

The visionary proclaims, "Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and, their kings will serve you," whereas the attitude of the realist could be summarized in the old maxim: "God helps those who help themselves."<sup>1430</sup>

If we take the trouble to understand this situation in the light of our 'revolution'/revisionism approach everything becomes perfectly clear. Instead of adopting the proper 'revolutionary' *partnership* strategy in which Israel's job is to give a public display of radical solidarity, leaving to Yahweh the job of vindicating this exercise, the priestly hierarchs attempt to force the issue by rebuilding the Temple, thereby

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<sup>1428</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 64.

<sup>1429</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 248.

<sup>1430</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 73.

pretending that they are in a position to bring in the Kingdom all by themselves. The prophetic visionaries, being true 'revolutionaries', naturally find such behaviour reprehensible. They insist that according to the terms of the 'revolution' exercise vindication can only come about when the shaming process starts kicking in. This shaming process, they say, is something over which Israel has no control (i.e. it is Yahweh's business alone) and it will only become apparent that it is working when the Gentiles start demonstrating their change of heart by, for example, offering to rebuild the Temple they so wantonly destroyed.

Hanson himself cannot see this, of course, because, for reasons best known to himself, he is in denial of ideology and so can only interpret the texts religiously. Thus, as he sees it, the hierocrats are not viewed by the prophetic visionaries as revisionist but rather as religious imbeciles (apparent pagans) who deny the natural dialectics of the historical process and instead insist on an absolute, unchanging and inviolable status quo:

It is this resurgent [Canaanite] mythical equation of temple structure and prosperity, and this inability to conceive of the presence of Yahweh apart from the temple edifice, which sets Haggai apart from the pre-exilic prophets and explains the bitter opposition which his message met from groups regarding themselves as carriers of the prophetic tradition.<sup>1431</sup>

According to Hanson, if the hierarchs were in error for denying the dialectics of history so too were the prophetic visionaries. For in arguing that it will be up to Yahweh to save the situation by acting at some future date alone, the prophetic visionaries, in their enfeebled state, were guilty of abandoning history and escaping into a pretend world of myth:

In opposition to the continuity with earlier temple structures characterizing the hierocratic group, these visionaries produce a vision dedicated to utter discontinuity with the structures of the past, reaching back for their models instead to ancient myths and archaic native traditions. Viewing their situation from the perspective of loss of power and oppression, they are able to conceptualise restoration only as a complete reversal to be effected by Yahweh alone, without their own efforts to reform existing institutions or to convince contemporary leaders to share their vision. They thus abandoned the stubborn insistence of their prophetic predecessors to relate the vision of Yahweh's saving action to the events of history. Historical events record only the left hand of God's activity, his judging activity as defeats and calamities come to be interpreted as the horrors of the end-time which will find their full expression before salvation draws near. The vision of that salvation, meanwhile, has broken almost completely from the historical realm, being described in cosmic terms in no way limited by the contingencies of history. The temptation eschewed by Second Isaiah has seduced these later disciples into escaping into the timeless repose of a view of salvation which is largely mythic in nature.<sup>1432</sup>

Though the prophetic visionaries may well have been tempted on certain occasions to abandon their ideological responsibilities by leaving everything up to Yahweh, the fact that they claimed that the rebuilding of the Temple was Yahweh's job, not theirs,

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<sup>1431</sup> Henson, *Dawn*, p. 248.

<sup>1432</sup> Henson, *Dawn*, p. 394. See also *Dawn*, p. 73-4: 'In Isaiah 60- 62 the sealed gates (Ezek 44:1 ff) are cast open, for *all* the people will be righteous and holy. The obsession with the minute details of the rebuilt temple is replaced by a glorious vision of a restored Zion, the tedious measurements of the dimensions of walls and gates yield to walls called "Salvation," and gates "Praise." And this whole glorious restoration is to take place not because of any priestly efforts to regulate the holy, but because "... your light has come, the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you" (60:1). Yahweh's initiative alone accounts for the blessed transformation.'

cannot possibly be taken as a sign of such behaviour. Indeed Hanson couldn't be further off target in claiming that, in making this suggestion, the prophetic visionaries were leaving the real world of history and disappearing into an escapist realm of myth. For there is nothing in the least bit mythical or escapist about the prophetic visionaries' reactive hope. Indeed it is quite as down to earth as the alternative proactive strategy which the priestly hierarchs (like their counterparts in the modern state of Israel) advocated: the belief that opponents should be beaten into submission by the use of superior intelligence and organisation. Hanson, from his bourgeois standpoint, may judge the Hebrew 'revolutionary' strategy to be impractical but this is a matter in which only long term history will be the judge. In the interim I have no hesitation in saying that I see Hanson as being the one who is up the creek, not the prophetic visionaries.

In fact there are signs that Hanson is not completely sure of his ground for at one point he attempts to put forward an alternative suggestion to explain the prophetic visionaries' evident dislike of the Temple project:

It may be well to recall here the main features of the victorious hierocratic party which would be the chief source of irritation and alienation for the visionaries during the period of the Second Temple. The first is the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem, built under Persian sponsorship and thereby symbolizing vividly for the visionaries the Persian-Israelite coalition. Opposition to the temple of course drew on an ancient tradition which was very critical of the temple theology, a tradition tracing back as far as Nathan's oracle, and appearing also in Jeremiah and the Isaianic school. But in the post-exilic period, opposition went far beyond rivalry between divergent traditions as the visionaries looked upon the temple and the policy of collaboration with the Persians as a threat to the very autonomy and lordship of Yahweh, the supreme God who needed no sponsor beside himself. The memory of what had happened under the Zimride dynasty in the North and under Manasseh was too much alive in the tradition to permit some Yahwists to acquiesce to foreign control of the central unit.<sup>1433</sup>

Given the fact that, on Hanson's own admission, it was the prophetic visionaries who insisted that when the time was ripe Yahweh would rebuild the Temple, using foreigners to do the work, I find his erudite argument that these same prophetic visionaries were against the Temple rebuilding project *because it evidenced foreign interference in Israel's affairs* somewhat drole! Is this Hanson clutching at straws?

5. As far as ethics are concerned do the texts evidence a stance for or against the stranger?

Our own study highlighted one aspect which clearly marked out the Hebrew ethic: its offer of protection to the foreigner. For all the texts from the ancient Near East in our possession, other than the biblical ones, make it abundantly evident that the stranger, when not specifically protected by some special agreement, was considered fair game. This being the case it would make sense for us now to ask how the post-exilic texts treat this issue.

This is what Hanson himself has to say on the subject:

In Is 60:3 the glorious promise is made: "Nations will come to your light and kings to your rising brightness." The universalism inchoate in those early formulations is stated boldly in what

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<sup>1433</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp. 284-5.

is perhaps one of the latest parts of Third Isaiah (56:1-8). In that passage we read about the part which foreigners will have in the worship in Yahweh's house:

And to foreigners who pledge themselves to Yahweh to minister to him,  
to love the name of Yahweh, and to become his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath undefiled and hold fast to my covenant:  
them will I bring to my holy mountain  
and make thorn joyful in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar,  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

This temple policy stands in sharp contrast to the narrow exclusiveness which we have found to be characteristic of the Zadokite-led hierocratic group. It is a tolerant policy which developed organically out of the open attitude toward temple worship and the priesthood and formed an essential part of the visionary program of restoration: "Your people shall all be righteous. . . ." (60:21a); "You will be named the priests of Yahweh, ministers of our God" (61:6x). To be sure, the openness in that sixth-century document was primarily inner-Israelite. Since that time, however, the powerful impetus of nationalism had been driven out of the visionary group by the schism which tore the community asunder, and led to the salvation judgment oracle which defined the division between those to be delivered and those to be damned not along national boundaries but on the basis of the distinction between the righteous and wicked "of all flesh."<sup>1434</sup>

If in reading these remarks we stick firmly to what Hanson tells us is to be found in the actual texts the situation is once again perfectly clear. The prophetic visionaries take a 'revolutionary' stance 'for the stranger' whereas the priestly hierarch take a revisionist and exclusive stance bringing them back to the normal civilisation position of being 'against the foreigner'. But, of course, Hanson cannot accept this to be the case because it designates the conflict between the two post-exilic parties as being ideological, which will never do. Consequently he is forced to try and argue that the stance of the prophetic visionaries was not in fact revolutionary but rather due to their 'tolerant policy'. Tolerance, of course, as we have already remarked, is not a characteristic Hebrew virtue. What is more, elsewhere Hanson himself has described these same prophetic visionaries as anything but tolerant. So why should they of all people be tolerant towards strangers – a virtue rarely if ever found in the ancient world even amongst the Greeks? Hanson tries to persuade us that it developed naturally out of an open attitude towards temple worship but this is just eyewash. For why did the prophetic visionaries have such an open attitude and why, for goodness sake, would such an open attitude include foreigners of all people? As a desperate last throw Hanson attempts to persuade us that in losing their historical nerve and retreating into myth the prophetic visionaries managed to slough off their normal nationalism and metamorphose into dreamy universalists!

6. As far as recriminations are concerned do the texts identify their opponents' error as a form of hypocrisy or just plain wickedness?

The thinking underlying this final question will not be found in the earlier part of this work but rather in the volume which preceded it. In my book *Light Denied* I analysed the concept of hypocrisy in the Gospels and found it to be strangely unlike the sort of

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<sup>1434</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp. 385-6.



hypocrisy we civilisation people habitually talk about. Whereas, for us, hypocrisy is the third rate behaviour of an individual who has double standards, publicly denouncing wanton behaviour which he secretly indulges in himself, in the Gospels, with their marginal outlook, the word means something rather different. There, hypocrisy means the admired behaviour of an honoured individual who uses such conduct to disguise the fact that he is secretly avoiding his 'revolutionary' responsibility to love the neighbour as the self.<sup>1435</sup>

The important thing to remember in distinguishing between these two sorts of hypocrisy is that whereas with the normal civilisation crime the culprit is some wretched official who, on being exposed, is considered by everyone to merit discomfiture, in the case of the Biblical crime the culprit is a truly righteous civilisation individual who by common consent bears no comparison with the former accused, for to condemn such a person is to condemn oneself. Our last question therefore, is this: Do the recriminations evident in the post-exilic texts show any whiff of this second, quite extraordinary form of hypocrisy in which *people are held to account for strictly performing to the letter what it is generally recognised that good civilisation folk should do?*

In his comments on Isaiah 58. 1-12 Hanson described the accusations which the prophetic visionaries levelled against the priestly hierocrats:

Above all, one is struck by the emphasis upon the self-righteousness of those being attacked; they obviously regard themselves as religiously elite and impeccable in matters concerning the cult. Verses 2-5 leave no doubt that their righteousness is based on meticulous conformity to the prescribed observances of the official cult: (1) "They inquire of me daily" ... (2) "They delight in the knowledge of my ways." ... (3) "As if they were a nation doing righteousness" ... a contrived act of self-deception, for in fact they are a nation "abandoning the law of its God" . (4) The exquisite irony of the polemic comes out beautifully as the accusation that they have abandoned the justice of Yahweh is followed immediately by reference to their cultic activity, "they ask me for just ordinances." They have forsaken the *mispāt* of Yahweh ("justice," in the sense of, e.g., Is 61:8) in their very act of seeking the *mispātīm* of the cult ("ordinances," in the sense of, e.g., Lev 26:46), that is, they have turned their backs on true religion in their self-righteous obsession with the particulars of cultic observance. (5) "They delight in drawing near to God." ... Indeed, the entire enterprise described in verse 2 is the priestly activity around the cult, betraying the same obsessions with statutes and ordinances which characterize the hierocratic tradition.<sup>1436</sup>

In comparison here are Hanson's comments on Ezekiel 44 – a text he sees as reflecting the exclusivist views of the priestly hierocrats after the construction of the Temple – in which he describes the criticism the Zadokites levelled against the Levites who, Hanson believes, operated as fellow travellers with the prophetic visionaries.

The form of the oracle .. is intriguing, ... for it follows that form of the salvation judgment oracle whose rise we traced in the struggles of the prophetic group in Third Isaiah. Only here the sides are reversed: the side being threatened with judgment in the oracles of Third Isaiah here is promised salvation, and vice versa, pointing to the perplexing community crisis where antagonistic claims are being made in the name of the same God. ... Verse 6 is in the form of the commission to address the rebellious house of Israel. The indictment against the apostate people comes in verses 6b-8, ... Then in 10-14 the awaited sentence appears, being a sentence of

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<sup>1435</sup> I feel free to use the male pronoun since there is no instance in the Gospels of a female being accused of having this disorder – which is not to say that it doesn't happen of course!.

<sup>1436</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp.108-9.

judgment against the Levites for having gone astray after idols. Two features of this sentence are very noteworthy: (1) the offence for which the sentenced party is being indicted is construed in the vaguest of terms, in the terms of idolatry in general, an idolatry which moreover is applied indiscriminately to all elements in Israel which are non-Zadokite. This language, so reminiscent of the vague and generalizing changes of idolatry in Third Isaiah, is not cast in the language of historical description, but rather in the language of heated polemic where the sole object is to malign the opposing party so as to support the accuser's claim to sole legitimacy. (2) The incredible degree to which the status of the Levites has been degraded is expressed by the fact that their duties are assigned to them as the substance of their sentence of judgment. Whereas their duties in the basic work of Ezekiel were given them because they were the honoured possession of Yahweh, here these duties are *their punishment for idolatry!* These are the terms of temple slaves, not of members of the priesthood, and the description of their duties bears this out: theirs are the most menial types of tasks, watching the gates and preparing the sacrificial animals. Whereas the Zadokites are to serve Yahweh, the Levites are to serve the people. Whereas the Zadokites are to draw near to Yahweh to serve him as priests, this is strictly forbidden the Levites, who must bear their shame: "They shall not come near to me, to serve me as priest, nor come near any of my sacred things and the things that are most sacred; but they shall bear their shame, because of the abominations which they have committed" . . .<sup>1437</sup>

What is interesting about this comparison is that whereas it is clear both sides employed the language of idolatry in formulating their accusations and used every means at their disposal to emphasise the terrible wrongdoings of their opponents, only the prophetic visionaries built their case on a charge of hypocrisy – that terrible hypocrisy of the righteous who do everything to prove their righteousness while dismally failing in the only essential – and what a case it is! This noteworthy imbalance is even more remarkable when one takes into account the fact that Hanson himself completely fails to grasp its significance and so makes nothing of it. Indeed, as an obvious indication of the ideological nature of the conflict, Hanson, in his usual manner, does everything he can to play down this accusation of hypocrisy by emphasising that the texts, as polemical exercises, cannot be trusted when it comes to evaluating the truthfulness of the criticisms made. He is right, of course, in saying that the accusations made by the priestly hierocrats are vague and that it is difficult to determine precisely what it was that they held against the prophetic visionaries – apart from the fact that they were far too lax in their dealings with foreigners (see Ezek 44.9). However, there is no justification whatsoever for pretending that the prophetic visionaries left things unclear. Yet Hanson manifestly fails to take on board what it was they were driving at.

Take, for example his comments On Isaiah 65. 1-25:

The first seven verses of the chapter give a shocking description of the self-righteous majority, a description which is consonant with and complementary to the picture of them given by the earlier oracles. It is again a picture of a group very actively engaged in sacred activities, but they are activities which infuriate rather than please Yahweh. . . . The passage is again saturated with the technical language of the cult, as well as with phrases reminiscent of earlier attacks of the prophetic group against those they regard as apostates; e.g., although Yahweh makes himself present, they do not call on his name (cf. 64:6). As chapter 58 also makes clear, this does not imply that they neglected cultic activities, for it is precisely . . . in the cult, that they provoke him to anger. Verses 3-4a enumerate their defiled cultic practices, using what is probably the strongest traditional language available to the author to suggest defilement.

Here we find Hanson once again describing in detail the charge of hypocrisy which the prophetic visionaries level against the priestly hierocrats. But does he show that he

<sup>1437</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp. 265-6.

actually understands the charge itself? He makes the obvious point that we are not supposed to take the language literally:

The language is not meant to be taken any more literally than the charge in 59:5-6 that they hatch adders' eggs and spin spider's webs, or the indictment in 57:5-8 that they sacrifice their children and build a harlot's bed on a hilltop.

However, he then goes on to cast doubt on the issue by suggesting that because of the polemical character of the debate it is not always easy to make out what the real accusation is:

In treating such symbolical language, the exegete's task is to discern the actual abuses being attacked with this symbolical, hyperbolical language, a task which can be met with greater success in some cases than in others.

That said, he is willing to admit that in the case of Isaiah 59.5-6, at least, the general meaning of the images is clear:

The party being attacked, though ostensibly righteous, is treacherously dangerous to the community.

But this, of course, tells us precisely nothing for why do the prophetic visionaries claim that the righteousness of the priestly hierocrats is only 'ostensible' and what makes them say that such hypocritical conduct is 'treacherously dangerous to the community'? Hanson never tells us but, returning to his exegesis of Isaiah 65, concludes:

... A more biting attack on the central tenet of that tradition can hardly be imagined than equating [the priestly hierocrats] special sanctity with paganizing practices. ... The judgement on the cult of the priestly group could not be more unequivocal.<sup>1438</sup>

In this way, while pretending to reveal what it was that the prophetic visionaries were attacking, Hanson leaves us with no more than a vague impression that what we have in this great debate is your usual family-type dispute in which there is truth and exaggeration on both sides.

Here, as throughout this material, we are unable to determine the degree of distortion in the description which one group gives of the other. We must remind ourselves repeatedly that we are tracing the struggles of the post-exilic period not through the eyes of objective reporters, but through the interpretations of first one party in the struggle and then the other.<sup>1439</sup>

In this way he tries very hard for his own undisclosed reasons to cloud the underlying political issue (is it to get himself off the Bible's excruciating ideological hook?). However, if we refuse to be confused and, disregarding his usual claim that the debate between the two post-exilic parties is religious,<sup>1440</sup> concentrate firmly on the politics of the controversy it at once becomes clear that the prophetic visionaries are indeed accusing their opponents of this special hypocrisy while the priestly hierarchs, for their part, are lashing back in the usual civilisation manner with vague counter-accusations of dark and terrible, but noticeably not hypocritical, wickedness.

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<sup>1438</sup> Hanson *Dawn*, pp. 146-9.

<sup>1439</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 113.

<sup>1440</sup> e.g. '... they have turned their backs on true religion'. See quotation on p. 443 above.

### *Conclusion*

The necessary verdict given as a consequence of these six questions specifically designed to isolate the 'revolutionary' Hebrew position is surely not in doubt. In all honesty we are obliged to pronounce that the priestly hierocrats were revisionists and that the prophetic visionaries were true 'revolutionaries' regardless of how we ourselves stand in the matter.

### *Jewish Apocalyptic as a Belief in Miraculous Salvation*

With our ideological examination of the two conflicting post-exilic traditions satisfactorily completed it is time now to take up the question we posed at the beginning of this chapter. Does Jewish apocalyptic constitute a belief in 'miraculous salvation' – a bizarre conviction supposedly held by certain intertestamental Jews that if they faithfully carried out the task Yahweh had given them he would intervene to save them when they got into difficulties *by miraculously altering the normal course of events*? Certainly Hanson's thesis that Jewish apocalyptic came about as a result of an abandonment of strategic thinking (a dialectics of faith) and a descent into speculation and myth-making, lends credence to such an idea and since this is the case we will be obliged to return one last time to his arguments to see if there is any truth in them.

Hanson's claim is that Jewish apocalyptic developed gradually out of the classical prophetic tradition as a result of the exclusion of the prophetic visionaries from positions of influence in the post-exilic community. The result of this exclusion, so he argues, was that they steadily lost all hope of achieving vindication (of realising their Kingdom of God) within history by the normal dialectical process. He believes this forced them to conceive of its introduction being postponed to some future mythic/eschatological time when it would take place as an entirely solo performance by God.

Increasingly the view of the classical prophets that God's promises to his people would be fulfilled within the context of historical events yielded to the belief that fulfilment would be imposed upon a fallen world in a cataclysmic display of force by the Cosmic Warrior Yahweh. By the mid-fifth century the visionary group's evaluation of the capacity of historical events as carriers of the salvation hope had grown so bleak as to engender the conviction that restoration could occur only after a disruptive and devastating series of events in which Yahweh would annul the order established at the creation of the world, supplanting it with a new paradisiacal order of harmony and prosperity. Within this dualistic view of reality, which moved the religion of the visionaries dangerously close to the worldview of myth, history began to lose the salvific significance with which it had been impregnated by the classical prophets in their effort to translate the cosmic vision into the idiom of historical events. In apocalyptic eschatology we detect historical events being used less and less frequently to construct a *Heilsgeschichte*, [and] increasingly as data for learned speculation regarding the cosmic timetable: according to the events of the world, how close do we stand to the day of Yahweh, that turning point from the old era of decay to the new world of shalom? This speculation on the cosmic timetable is not yet full-blown in our material, for it would ultimately produce the elaborate historical resumé, specifying for the faithful the precise point at which they stood in the sweep of history from creation to the eschaton (e.g. 1 Enoch 85-90, 93:3- 10; 91:12- 17; Assumption of Moses 2- 10; 2 Esd 3:4-27; Apocalypse of Baruch 53-'14). But as Zech 11:4-17 (+ 13:7-9) and Zechariah 14 indicate, we already have in the fifth century the periodization of history which supplied the basis for the later elaboration.<sup>1441</sup>

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<sup>1441</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp. 405-6.

What we find here is an argument based not just on a single novelty supposedly identified in the prophetic visionaries' texts – the introduction of speculation regarding Yahweh's action at some vague future date to bring in his kingdom *alone*,<sup>1442</sup> no actual *hand of God* being specified – but on three accompanying characteristics:

- 1) The appearance of a new mythic and hence *universalistic thinking* in which the good are seen as pitted against the wicked, which stands in strong contrast with the former historical and hence *nationalistic approach* in which Israel was seen as pitted against foreigners.<sup>1443</sup>
- 2) The appearance of a new *second creation* thinking in which the belief is that things have become so corrupt that along with creating a new spirit in mankind it will be necessary for God to institute a whole new natural order to turn things 'round.<sup>1444</sup>
- 3) The appearance of a new, 'two epochs' thinking in which the belief is that the present historical time will eventually be brought to a close, at which point it will be replaced by a mythic/eschatological era.<sup>1445</sup>

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<sup>1442</sup> 'Throughout, the Divine Warrior acts alone without the mediation or assistance of human agents. He fights alone, he sends panic upon the enemy alone, he delivers alone. Having abdicated the political office of the classical prophets and having focused on a lofty vision lifted above the limits of historical contingency, the proponents of the apocalyptic eschatology in Zechariah 14 and related writings found that the traditional materials most useful to them were the materials of the league and royal cult, that is, the materials which still preserved the cosmic orientation of their ancient mythic sources.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 384.

<sup>1443</sup> 'No vision of restoration for the entire nation remains in Zechariah 14; no hope for a national repentance which could lead to purification of Israel; only a bloody purge whereby the wicked would be exterminated, leaving those who were destined to be recipients of the salvation to come. Thus the last ties with a conception of salvation along the lines defined by nationalism seem to be severed, yielding to a new dualism distinguishing not between nations but between evil and good on a broader scale. In the wake of this development is a strong impetus toward universalism in a much more radical sense than that found earlier in the tradition (e.g., in Second Isaiah). For if the distinguishing division of the end-time is not between the Jew and the foreigner, but between the righteous and the wicked, then that division could not easily be confined to Israel, but would extend outward to include all the nations of the world. It is no accident that the collapse of the political aspects of the prophetic office is followed closely by strong expressions of universalism unprecedented in earlier biblical tradition (Is 56:3- 8; 66:18- 23; Zech 14:16, 20- 21; Mal 1: 11).' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 396.

<sup>1444</sup> But the dualism spawned by the deepening pessimism of the age penetrated beneath the social and political fabric of the world to the realm of nature, with the result of a blending of ethical dualism into ontological dualism. Conditions were so grim that the situation could not be righted by a change within human hearts alone, not even by a universal assize dividing the righteous from the wicked. The corruption had permeated the natural order itself. A notion found in Second Isaiah and developed in Isaiah 65 here is broadened to portray a full-scale reordering of the natural realm. The full impact of mythopoeic thought expresses itself at this point. The world is locked in a struggle between two orders, one ruled by sterility, corruption, death, the other by fertility, vitality, life. It is a struggle that effects not only the political sphere, but also the functions of nature. The end-time would have to produce new sources of energy to recreate a context which would once again be life-sustaining rather than life-destroying. As we shall see below, the legacy of classical prophetism to apocalyptic eschatology forced the exclusion of the endless cycle which was an original part of the mythopoeic pattern, for only one act of recreation was envisioned, not endless recreative acts. But that one recreation was conceived of in terms drawn heavily from mythic modes of thought. Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 397.

<sup>1445</sup> 'The rigidifying of dualistic thinking also leads to a strengthening of a feature tracing back in Hebrew thought as far as Second Isaiah, the division of history into epochs. In Zechariah 14, the old era would culminate soon in the apocalyptic woes described with shocking vividness. These apocalyptic woes would be ended by Yahweh's final intervention and defeat of the hordes of the nations. Then would begin

However, though Hanson claims he can find evidence for such important changes in thinking within the post-exilic texts, I am persuaded that for the most part he has simply had to invent them because of his obtuseness in denying the obvious ideological nature of the texts. In order to allow the reader to judge between us in this matter let me set out clearly my counter arguments:

*A new situation in which God is imagined as acting without a historical hand.*

There is an unfortunate ambiguity in Hanson's argument about the increasing tendency in the prophetic visionaries' texts for God to be seen as acting *alone*. For acting alone can signify either of two different things. It can mean that God acts alone without human assistance or it can mean that he acts directly and mythically without any historical intermediary. The trouble is that these constitute quite different arguments, which makes it unfortunate that Hanson sometimes runs them together (as for example in the passage quoted in note 1442 p. 447 above). If Hanson's case is that it was novel for the prophetic visionaries to suggest that it was God's business alone to bring in his kingdom then he is clearly talking through his hat. For, as we know, the whole concept of a marginal revolution is built on a covenantal agreement in which each side is seen as having its job to do. The marginals' job is to stand up for themselves and demonstrate to the world what it means to live in radical solidarity and Yahweh's job is to see them vindicated by bringing in salvation through the process of shaming. So if there was a Hebrew 'revolution' (which I have claimed there must have been since it is clearly there in the texts and no one could have possibly invented such an outrageous phenomenon) we can say with assurance that from its very beginning (whenever that was) it would have been well understood by Hebrew revolutionaries that Yahweh *and no one else* had the job of actually bringing about salvation by vindicating the shaming process. All this is not to suggest that I believe the prophetic visionaries never considered chucking in their hand, leaving Yahweh to deal with the mess all by himself,<sup>1446</sup> for, knowing myself, I am only too well aware that they must have been sorely tempted. However, to prove the presence of such thinking actually in the texts it would be necessary to show that the prophetic visionaries no longer thought humans had a significant role to play and whereas I can offer many passages in which these writers stress the need for the faithful to continue with their efforts<sup>1447</sup> Hanson is unable to offer a single text which indicates that human contributions were seen as counting for nothing.

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the universal reign of Yahweh, inaugurated by a new creation terminating the ancient polarities of the universe, and leading to a period of uninterrupted fertility, prosperity, and peace. This essential division provides the basis for the further elaboration of the notion of world epochs in later apocalyptic writings, and also provides compatible soil into which the notion of the four world empires could be transplanted and could flourish.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 397.

<sup>1446</sup> Of course Yahweh is a god who by his nature refuses to act alone in this way. Understood in the terms of the shaming business this means that shaming will never take place unless those badly treated stand up for themselves which stands to reason.

<sup>1447</sup> e.g. Is. 56.1: Thus says the Lord;  
Keep justice and do righteousness,  
For soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance will be revealed.

However, it seems that Hanson's *fundamental* argument is not about God acting without human assistance, which is just as well, but rather about his acting directly and mythically without any historical intermediary. Hanson's real case appears to be that the prophetic visionaries were guilty of breaking the dialectics of history when they described God as introducing his kingdom, though he fails at the same time to indicate what it was that was actually happening in the world which made them say this. In arguing against Hanson I would first like to point out that whereas in *some* situations there is indeed an obligation to 'name the hand of God', as Hanson insists must *always* be done, *to do so in others isn't even appropriate, let alone necessary.*

Let me demonstrate this point by comparing the situation of the prophetic visionaries with that of Second Isaiah. When Cyrus decreed that the exiles could return to bring order to the broken community in the Persian province of Judah it was obviously necessary for Second Isaiah not only to declare that Yahweh was giving his people a second chance but to demonstrate why he said this by naming Cyrus as Yahweh's hand in this historical development taking place before peoples' eyes. However, things were quite different for the later prophetic visionaries when they were faced with the priestly hierarchs' decision to rebuild the Temple and set up an exclusivist cult within it. In opposition to this ideologically scandalous act, which according to Hanson they interpreted as an attempt to bring in the kingdom by force, the prophetic visionaries felt the need to publicly reaffirm the community's foundation principle: that Israel's business was to demonstrate radical solidarity, leaving it up to Yahweh to vindicate the exercise by shaming the Gentile nations into changing their ways. It stands to reason that in such a situation it would have been quite inappropriate for the prophetic visionaries to name Yahweh's intermediary since all they were doing was reaffirming a principle which they believed their opponents were undermining.

So our understanding could be summarised like this. If a prophet is arguing for a change of tactics then of course he must refer to the historical situation because a change of tactics can only be judged in such a light. However, if he is arguing against someone else's tactic it may not be appropriate for him to refer to the historical circumstances for everything will depend on where he sees their fault as lying. If he sees their fault as being practical – their tactic demonstrating a failure to be realistic – then some reference to the historical circumstances will certainly be necessary. However, if the fault is ideological – their choice of tactic demonstrating a desire to abandon the principles by which the community has agreed to live – then a reference to the historical situation is inappropriate rather than necessary. It would appear, therefore, that all Hanson is doing by maintaining that a prophet should *always* refer to the historical situation when making his pronouncement is *to insist that prophets should perform practically rather than ideologically, which is absurd.* Of course Hanson can't see this because of his obdurate blindness towards all things ideological, but that is his problem not ours.

There is, however, a second and perhaps more important flaw in Hanson's argument, for the fact is that it was not the classical prophets who were responsible for introducing the art of dialectical thinking, an obviously erroneous supposition on which Hanson builds his entire interpretive exercise. As far as we can determine from human records, dialectical thinking has always existed for people have always thought strategically and

it is not possible to think strategically in any other way than dialectically. What was new in the circumstances was not the introduction of *dialectical thinking*, whether faith-centred or otherwise, but rather the introduction of a never-seen-before, alternative strategy: *developing strength out of weakness*. This new strategy, introduced into the world by the Hebrew ‘revolutionaries’ and later systematically defended by the pre-exilic and post-exilic prophets, was indeed dialectical since it was based on the conviction (well founded or otherwise) that history would eventually vindicate it. However, Hanson, in spite of his avowed interest in the subject of dialectics, persistently ignores this prime example of acting dialectically.

*A new mythic and universalist thinking.*

There can be no doubt that these texts created by the prophetic visionaries contain the idea of universal salvation. However, it would be absurd to try and argue that as such they constitute a novelty, as Hanson has the grace to admit. He is careful *only* to argue that they constitute *a radicalisation* of the universalism idea already found in Second Isaiah. However, the evidence suggests that this idea is much older than Second Isaiah for even the Yahwist seems to have been aware, as well he might, that there was no long term hope for a marginal community like Israel so long as a single empire in the Hebrew’s world (the ancient Near East) continued to hold her in its sights. This is presumably why he implied in the Abraham story<sup>1448</sup> that Israel was destined to bring about universal salvation. Circumstances being as they were Israel could not hope to find a corner of the world where she could hide for long. As a marginal community she therefore had to find a way of converting the world or she would assuredly go under. This means that properly understood the universalism idea must have been present pretty much from the very beginning though one would have to expect that as time went on this aspect of the question would increasingly come to dominate the ‘revolutionary’ community’s thoughts.

But of course Hanson is perfectly right to suggest that this universalism idea would constantly have been held in check by Israel’s nationalism as it too grew. However, the argument that the decisive break from nationalism within the prophetic visionary group came about as a result of its failure to keep a proper balance between vision and practicalities, leading to an abandonment of historical thinking, is pitiful nonsense. Indeed such an argument could only be advanced by someone who knows nothing of real life politics. Big political ideas, such as this, are invariably generated by ideological aspirations, They do not result from an albeit forgivable loss of political nerve, as Hanson would know if he had any experience of life at the bottom.

*A new creation to reverse corruption.*

Hanson identifies a number of verses in the prophetic visionaries’ texts which are of special interest. In these the process of restoration, in which Yahweh brings in his kingdom, is spoken about in terms of a transformation of the natural order. Hanson points out that one of these texts, Zechariah 14. 6-9, in its description of the suppression of the natural polarities governing human existence, such as between night and day and

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<sup>1448</sup> Genesis 12.1-3.



summer and winter, closely mirrors the description of the setting up of these same polarities in Genesis 1. He claims that these verses, with their message of a new mythical creation, constitute a late development in the prophetic visionaries' thinking which bears witness to their abandonment of the realistic approach of their forebears and their retreat into speculation as a result of the hopelessness and powerlessness of their situation. On this occasion we can pass over Hanson's thesis of reiteration (the scholarly delight in identifying how one biblical passage supposedly reflects another) without comment since it changes nothing as regards what interests us. For our concern centres entirely on Hanson's contention that these texts bear witness to a desire to abandon history and its dialectics in favour of the certitudes of myth. As we will shortly discover, the way we judge this matter will be greatly influenced by the texts we choose to analyse. For if we limit our horizon to this polarisation business, which certainly appears to be firmly based on the thinking expressed in the priestly creation myth in Genesis 1, it can appear to make some sense to argue, as Hanson does, that we are dealing with a phenomenon of mythical speculation notably absent from the classical prophets' works. If this is granted then it becomes perfectly reasonable for Hanson to go on and explain this novel situation by supposing that it was the result of the prophetic visionaries finding themselves without jobs in the post-exilic reconstruction and so becoming disillusioned. However, all of this depends on restricting our study to the polarisation question. If we widen our interest and take into account the other 'new-creation / transformed nature' phenomena in the prophetic visionaries' works, such as lions eating straw like oxen<sup>1449</sup> and an end to infant mortality,<sup>1450</sup> then we find ourselves in a completely different ball-game for such verses are closely associated with passages of scripture from both First and Second Isaiah which are redolent of ideological significance and contain not the slightest trace of defeat and disillusion. So with this issue in mind let us now see how Hanson actually makes his argument.

Understandably Hanson is happiest dealing with Zechariah 14 and its kindred polarisation passage, Isaiah 60. 19-21.

The dominion of evil has established itself so thoroughly that a reordering of the natural realm itself is called for. What is the nature of the change which would occur "on that day"? Essentially, what is promised is the abrogation of the polarities of the natural order which were, according to early tradition, established by Yahweh in the earliest times. This age-old order - founded upon the old divine pairs which formed the basis of the most ancient Near Eastern theogonies - had to be changed according to our composition, for it was an order which had fallen under the curse of a defiled people. ... Defeat following in the train of defeat has led to such depth of pessimism that a social order fallen to the point of unmitigated evil has been seen to pollute even the realm of nature (cf. Is 65:15-25). ... The resolution of the pairs of opposites into a higher unity is based ultimately on one ingredient alone, the conviction that despite the ubiquitous defeat, division, and decay, yet Yahweh remains the One, the Sovereign over all.<sup>1451</sup>

Even though I find this religious interpretation of Zephaniah 14 miserably uninspiring we will let it stand for the moment as at least a *possible* understanding of the passage. However, I note with interest Hanson's inclusion of Isaiah 65. 15-25 as another text which deals with the transformation-of-nature scenario.<sup>1452</sup> It is not difficult to

<sup>1449</sup> Is. 65.25.

<sup>1450</sup> Is. 65.20.

<sup>1451</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, pp. 377-379.

<sup>1452</sup> 'In the eschaton Yahweh will not only purge the human sphere, but will also "create new heavens and a new earth." In the context of a very bleak historical situation, the danger has become very great

understand why Hanson wants to include Isaiah 65.17 in his study since it refers to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. However, it is a dangerous tactic since it forms part of a passage which culminates in a description of the consequences of the introduction of the kingdom of God, in these terms:

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
The lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
And dust shall be the serpent's food.  
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain  
says the Lord.

The trouble for Hanson in implicitly (though not explicitly) including this verse in his study is first of all that it is a direct quotation from First Isaiah<sup>1453</sup> which means that it isn't feasible to argue, that it involves a new way of thinking. Further to this it clearly belongs with a host of other verses in First and Second Isaiah<sup>1454</sup> which also deal with the transformation of nature; their meaning, which is not in doubt, has nothing to do with disillusionment or mythic speculation. These verses get their significance from the fact that Yahweh's restoration is seen as the fulfilment of the covenant. In this, Israel performs as Yahweh's faithful servant and light to lighten the Gentiles and Yahweh vindicates this performance by actually bringing in his Kingdom. In this general restoration context, these passages dealing with the transformation of nature (the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the desert becoming pools of water and people building houses and then being able to live in them themselves etc) clearly constitute a belief that when the kingdom does eventually arrive – the Gentiles being shamed out of their oppressive behaviour and the whole world determined to live together in radical solidarity – it will be astonishing what will be seen as achievable. On that day all of us, and not just Hanson and my brother, will see that in point of fact there are virtually no limits to what is possible when people start behaving correctly.

Of course our problem with these texts is that they communicate in a manner that is somewhat dated. We no longer actually desire to live in a world in which leopards lie down with kids for, having destroyed so many of our fellow creatures, we are now quite desperate to preserve what we can of nature red in tooth and claw. However, that was not how the biblical writers saw things in their day so we obviously must be careful to make allowances and not foolishly accuse them of fleeing reality and indulging in mythical make-believe. Of course on this occasion Hanson is not guilty of this error since he is as silent as the grave on these particular passages. What all of this shows is that once we agree to include Isaiah 65. 18-25 in our discussion, as even Hanson grudgingly agrees we must, then his thesis that we should see them as constituting a flight from reality and disappearance into myth bites the dust. Indeed his whole tactic reveals itself as no more than a vain attempt to obscure the basic ideological intention of the writers by interpreting what they are saying as mindless religious rubbish.

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that Israel's historical interpretation of divine intervention will dissolve under the pressure of myth. The disparagement of the present order as unmitigated evil and the promise of a new creation threaten to dissolve the dialectic that earlier prophets had maintained between the primordial events and the historical events of the present (e.g., Is 51:9-11), events which were seen to be typologically related but never equated. Here the primordial events threaten to merge with the eschatological events in the timeless "now" of the cult.' Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 159.

<sup>1453</sup> Is. 11.6-7.

<sup>1454</sup> See Is 11.1-9; 35.1,5; 41. 17-20; 42. 6-7, 15-19; 43. 2-3, 44. 3-5; 45.12-13; 55. 12-13.

*A new eschatological age.*

Hanson believes it is possible to identify in third Isaiah and Zechariah 9-14 a progressive periodisation of history into distinct eras and a new belief that the age to come will be mythic rather than historical in character. He argues that these aspects witness to a change of thinking in which speculation progressively replaced dialectical (i.e. strategic and tactical) thinking and he attributes this change once again to the disillusionment resulting from the exclusion of the prophetic visionaries from positions of influence within the post-exilic community.<sup>1455</sup>

I am, of course, perfectly willing to accept that there is a natural tendency for people to retreat into religion in periods of powerlessness and oppression. It was after all Marx's recognition of this phenomenon which caused him to call religion the opium of the people. My quarrel with Hanson does not stem from the fact that I think it *unreasonable* for him to suggest that the prophetic visionaries gave up on reality and retreated into religion. For I believe that such a thing might well have happened and if it did I would find it perfectly comprehensible. But do the texts provide evidence of it actually happening? Hanson spends all of his time trying to prove that they do. However, it should be clearly recognised that it is an intrinsically difficult thing to demonstrate because it involves proving a change from using mythological language to communicate about historical matters (as everyone is agreed Second Isaiah did) to using the same mythological language to avoid doing such a thing (which is what Hanson claims the prophetic visionaries progressively tended to do). The problem here, of course, is that one is basically discussing not the texts themselves but the motives lying behind them and because these are the very things in dispute they cannot be taken for granted. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the simplest way of arbitrarily changing the meaning of a text is to attribute a new and unexpected motive for writing it, which means that arguments based *solely* on motivation should never be trusted. In the present case it is noticeable that in talking about periodisation and eras Hanson doesn't argue for clear-cut changes which could possibly be verified but for gradual changes in emphasis supposedly signifying a change in motivation, which is just about the most dubious kind of argument one could possibly think of.

Of course this whole climate of doubt is a problem of Hanson's own making since it stems entirely from his own decision to exclude ideological considerations from the debate. For usually it is the ideological colour of a text which most clearly designates

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<sup>1455</sup> 'A view of time introduced into prophetism by Second Isaiah (48:6-7) which divided salvation history into two distinct eras has developed in Zechariah 14 far beyond the point of embellishing an eschatology firmly moored to the realm of history. The raw force of the mythopoeic view of time lying far in the background of Second Isaiah's division reasserts itself powerfully in our composition, for that view of time, distinguishing between a present evil order and a future order of salvation has begun to apply extremely well to the bleak situation in which the visionary group found itself. Restoration of Yahweh's true followers could no longer be envisioned within the present evil social and natural order. Therefore that day of restoration had to be preceded by a cosmic battle which would eliminate the enemies of wickedness who caused the fall of the world to evil, and then by a new creation intended to restore the world to a paradisiacal purity suitable as a context for the restoration. The dualism and the related doctrine of the two eras (seasons) of Near Eastern myth are here revitalized in the visionary tradition.' Hanson, *Dawn*, pp 378-9.

the intentions of a writer. In this regard, in dealing with these post-exilic writings we are extremely fortunate because, as Hanson himself has revealed, we are presented not with a single point of view but with the stances of two parties who have numerous and serious disagreements. This should make it very much easier for us to determine the ideological colour of each viewpoint, as indeed it does, only Hanson will have none of it. If we highlight the ideological disagreement which these texts bear witness to, ignoring Hanson's protestation, then not only does it become immediately clear that the prophetic visionaries were taking a 'revolutionary' stance against the priestly revisionists but at the same time the texts themselves start making wonderful if uncomfortable sense (about the dangers of privilege) in strong contrast with the rubbish which Hanson manages to produce with his tortuous religious exegesis.

### *Conclusions*

While there is nothing inherently unbelievable in Hanson's argument that the prophetic visionaries increasingly abjured historical thinking and retreated into myth, as a result of their exclusion from power and influence in the post-exilic community, it has to be acknowledged that there is no hard evidence for such a hypothetical development in the texts themselves. For though Hanson believes he can find some, a careful examination of his reasoning shows that everything he produces results from misunderstandings due to his blind-eyeing of the texts' glaring ideological features. What is evident, however, is that there are no traces of ideological differences between the works of the prophetic visionaries and those of First and Second Isaiah for all of these texts are imbued with the same political colour: the colour of the Hebrew 'revolution'. That said, the significant deterioration in their circumstances due to the triumph of the priestly hierocrats clearly did cause the prophetic visionaries considerable problems; although they continued to announce the same old Hebrew strategy in global terms, unlike Second Isaiah they showed no tactical interest as regards furthering the 'revolutionary' cause in the particular circumstances of their day. This can only mean that they considered their lack of status within the community deprived them of the means of developing such a tactic. This we know to be a significant failure on their part, for the Hebrew strategy was specifically designed for those who have no proactive power in the form of influence in the world. One can only suppose that they had become accustomed to working with the respect of the community and that its sudden withdrawal left them nonplussed. This would certainly explain why the prophetic movement died out. For such a movement could not hope to survive simply by reiterating in increasingly colourful terms the correct 'revolutionary' position. In this regard it seems to me that Hanson is right to argue that the prophetic movement failed to be dialectical. However, he is clearly wrong in suggesting that this failure caused the prophetic visionaries to abandon a historical perspective and retreat into myth. What did happen, in the absence of any kind of strategic initiative, was that the prophetic movement came to a juddering halt.

The fact that we can find no evidence for saying that the prophetic visionaries were guilty of abandoning historical thinking does not mean that we can exonerate Jewish apocalyptic at the same time because, of course, it has only been Hanson's argument about a retreat into myth which has linked these two movements together (if indeed we

can even say that the latter constituted a movement of some sort<sup>1456</sup>). With this argument now invalidated the link too is destroyed which means that Jewish apocalyptic must now be judged on its own, irrespective of any conclusions we come to concerning the prophetic visionaries. So where do we now stand? Given that apocalyptic as a technique of expression cannot in itself be seen as constituting a movement it seems to me that we are obliged to judge every apocalyptic expression, wherever it appears, on its own merits. But how is such a judgement to be made? Since the criteria we have developed, based on our ‘revolution’/revisionism model, are quite involved I have set them out in the diagram below. In this you will see a strong central column in white, indicating the Hebrew covenant-based strategy in which the ‘revolutionary’ community (‘marginal-ideology disciples’) engage to operate reactively, performing a demonstration-exposure exercise and leaving it to Yahweh to vindicate this exercise by seeing that the shaming and change of behaviour of the Gentile nations does eventually takes place.

Retreat from Reality into suicidal Madness	Retreat into Religion and Myth	Relegating Responsibility Testing Yahweh	The Hebrew ‘Revolutionary’ Strategy	Revisionism: Assuming Yahweh’s responsibility	Adventurism	Retreat from Reality into violent suicidal madness
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In the two columns in pale grey, to either side of the middle column, you will find deviant strategies produced by ideological betrayal of some description. In the one to the left you will find what I have called the ‘relegating responsibility’ strategy in which individuals or groups within the ‘revolutionary’ community renege on their covenant commitment, leaving everything up to Yahweh. This is the ideological betrayal Moses charged the people with when he accused them of putting Yahweh to the proof.<sup>1457</sup> In the other pale-grey column to the right you will find the ‘revisionist’ strategy. Here the community in its impatience decides to reject the god of the marginals. It takes Yahweh’s responsibility upon itself and attempts to assure vindication through its own proactivity. This is clearly the strategy of ‘dominance’ we ourselves identified in Genesis 1 and attributed to P and it is equally clearly the proactive strategy adopted by the post-exilic priestly hierarchs which is why I refer to them as ‘friends of P’. These three central columns represent my ‘revolution’/ revisionism model, the Bible’s unifying theme. If the model restricts itself to two options alone this is only because those who reneged on their responsibilities did not contribute to the writing of scripture, or if they did their works were not included in the canon. In the medium grey columns

<sup>1456</sup> ‘... we ought not to think of apocalyptic as being primarily a ... particular literary type ... though common literary elements and ideas may be ascertained.’ Rowland, *Open*, p. 14. For full quotation see n. 1402 p. 429 above.

<sup>1457</sup> See Ex 17.

found yet further to the sides you will find strategic betrayals which have no clear ideological grounding. The one to the left is the strategy of 'retreat into religion and myth' which Hanson has so well described. He blames the prophetic visionaries for falling into this trap but, as we have seen, his accusations are groundless. It is my belief that there are no texts in the Bible which bear the imprint of this particular disorder or indeed the imprints of the other three disorders which I have introduced simply to complete the overall picture. The disorder on the right in the medium-grey column paralleling the 'retreat into religion' strategy I have called 'adventurism'. This is a well documented strategic disorder in which young revolutionaries become so intoxicated with the power their movement generates that they come to believe themselves invincible and so engage themselves and their comrades in missions which endanger the revolution. Outside in dark-grey columns on the far left and right you will find mad suicidal strategies associated in one way or another with a complete detachment from political reality. Such strategies are well documented in modern, though not in ancient history and it is of this weird kind of madness that Jewish Apocalypticists stand accused by some biblical scholars.

Our own study has revealed that, in spite of what scholars have maintained, the biblical witness holds remarkably tightly to the centre, only spreading out to left and right as far as ideological betrayal and never coming even close to the madness of miraculous salvation. In itself this would make it seem unlikely that the only work of Jewish apocalyptic included in the canon – the book of Daniel – would itself stray far from the centre. With this in mind let us see how Rowland analyses this text. He divides the book into two parts on the basis of its contents:

In the first part (Dan. 1-6) we have stories about a righteous Jew in Babylon called Daniel, together with the interpretation of two dreams. In the second half of the book (Dan. 7-12) we have various revelations by dream-vision or angelic pronouncement. The second half of the book contains the apocalypse proper.

Speaking of the first part of the book he comments:

The detailed accounts of Israel's history, which are a feature of the apocalypses, obviously depend for their impact on the pretence of being previews of future events foretold long before by holy men of the past. Nevertheless the historical determinism which is presupposed in these spurious predictions is manifest also in the carefully structured account of the prelude to the new age which is found in the sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls (Rev. 6; 8-9; 16).

Although there is use of symbolism in Daniel (e.g. the statue in 2.31ff., the beasts in 7.1ff. and the ram and goat in 8.3ff.), this does not compare with the variety of images which are used in (the New Testament work) Revelation. In this respect Daniel, like other Jewish apocalypses, exhibits a more restrained use of the stock of images available to the apocalypticist. In addition, in every case where the imagery forms part of the dream-visions in Daniel, an interpretation is offered of the significance of that imagery. With the exception of Daniel 7, it is nowhere suggested that the imagery which forms part of the dream-visions is to be taken as anything but a pictorial presentation of events which are to take place on earth. The meaning of the dreams has to be interpreted for the seer and reader alike. Rowland, *Open*, p. 12.

Finally here are his comments on Chapter 7:

The 'son of man' vision in Daniel 7 ... is, in the author's eyes, not a revelation only about the future vindication of the saints of the Most High but also a demonstration of the temporary nature of dominance of the world power now oppressing Israel. As such the revelation has the effect of unveiling the transient nature of the world-order and the rectitude of the stand of the saints. Rowland, *Open*, p. 14.

It seems to me that what Rowland is describing here is once again *a view of the Hebrew strategy from the centre*, only here using the apocalyptic dream technology as a manner of expression. The only possible quibble is in his assertion that the author's future prediction of vindication exhibits the same historical determinism as that which is presupposed in his/her spurious prophecies of the past. This reference to historical determinism, however, does not mean that Rowland sees Daniel's predictions of the future as being in any way speculative or mythical, let alone a sign of political madness. All it means is that he sees the author asserting as an act of faith that Yahweh *will indeed someday vindicate Israel's stance*, and such an expression of political faith has always been exhibited by marginal-ideology disciples. There is, however, as I see it a legitimate question to be put regarding the book's standpoint on dominance:

I saw in the night visions,  
and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man,  
and to him was given glory and kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.<sup>1458</sup>

It should be noted, however, that though the writer of Daniel certainly employs the language of dominance he does not advocate an ideology of dominance. Indeed quite the reverse is true as can be seen in this passage:

‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,  
which shall be different from all the kingdoms,  
and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down and break it to pieces.  
As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,  
and another shall arise after them;  
He shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings.  
He shall speak words against the Most High,  
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,  
and shall think to change the times and the law;  
and they shall be given into his hand for a time, two times, and half a time.  
But the court shall sit in judgement, and his dominion shall be taken away,  
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.  
And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven  
Shall be given to the people of the Most High;  
Their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom’  
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.’<sup>1459</sup>

What we see here are two completely different forms of dominance. The first is a very worldly attitude associated with the power-grabbing Gentile powers, the sort of dominance which Israel in her former years disastrously began to ape, thus breaking her covenant with Yahweh. The second is an eschatological dominance given to those who merit it which simply signifies the belief that non-domineering behaviour in the here and now will finally be vindicated. This is a very different scenario from that which we came across with P and his friends. These revisionists attempted to correct the Yahwist's 'revolutionary' ideology by introducing into it the completely foreign idea of god-given dominance. The writer of the book of Daniel is no revisionist as he very adequately proves by insisting that Israel is an indivisible community spanning time and geography, which was given a task, failed to carry it out, was punished for

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<sup>1458</sup> Dan 7.13-14.

<sup>1459</sup> Dan 7.23-26.

covenant breaking, was pardoned and given a second chance<sup>1460</sup> and now has to prove its worth in spite of all the difficulties, without any assurance of how long it will take.<sup>1461</sup> The only reservation I have regarding the writer's work is whether an eschatological approach such as his leaves room for Gentile conversion: the crucial concept of shaming and softening of hearts.

With this examination of the post-exilic period culminating in the book of Daniel we complete the study of the Jewish Bible begun in Chapter 4. Our objective was to determine the Bible's ideology. The conclusion we have come to is abundantly clear. The foundational principle on which the Bible is built is Yahweh, god of the marginals. It is the Bible's ruling political idea which colours all the other biblical notions. Even where it is rejected, in the revisionist writings, it continues to control procedures by constituting that from which people are attempting to hide. It is the unifying principle which we have spoken about in terms of the 'revolution'/ revisionism model and there is no proper way of interpreting the Bible except in its terms ... though this has rarely if ever been scholarship's practice.

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<sup>1460</sup> For all of this see Daniel's prayer in Chapter 9. 3-19.

<sup>1461</sup> See Dan 12. 5-13.



## Chapter 20

### Old Testament Exegesis In the Light of the God of the Marginals

Before returning to our main objective, which is to use our newly acquired understanding of the biblical ideology to construct a satisfactory portrait of the historical Jesus,<sup>1462</sup> I want to do something a little unusual. Instead of setting the scene by drawing a brief sketch of the world into which Jesus was born – the approach generally adopted by regular historians – we will do so by reviewing the way in which scholars have dealt with this Old Testament ideology which Jesus apparently attempted to incarnate. My hunch is that devoting a little time to highlighting the ways in which scholars have blind-eyed it will focus our minds on the fascination tinged with horror which it still inspires in us civilisation-folk, ‘believers’ and ‘non believers’ alike. This, I believe, will be a far better way of preparing ourselves to understand just how it must have been for those first-century fortunate/unfortunates when they found themselves faced with an ideology, not merely preserved in ancient writings which they could easily transform into something innocuous<sup>1463</sup> but actually played out before their very eyes by one who refused to go away or be silenced.

As we have seen, the easiest way to be rid of the god-of-the-marginals is to turn ideology into religion. That is how the revisionist P did the trick in Genesis 1, furtively dumping Yahweh as god-of-the-marginals while ostentatiously praising him to the skies as the wonderful, transcendent, metacosmic lord. This same tactic has been employed in one way or another by all who have wanted to be free of that terrible gaze which ruthlessly exposes civilisation’s naked hypocrisy (the hypocrisy of the righteous, not the relatively harmless bad-apple sort). Some have chosen to use the tactic grandly by proclaiming as loudly as they can that the Bible, as packaged religion,<sup>1464</sup> constitutes the inerrant word of God. In this way they short-circuit the dialectics on which ideological debate depends and replace it with religious certitude which only needs blind application, the emphasis being on the word blind. Others have employed the tactic with more circumspection. They have been content for the most part to use the terms of ordinary political debate and only disappear surreptitiously into a haze of religion when the contradiction between the Bible’s intransigence and their own accommodating<sup>1465</sup> political views becomes too blatant. Recently others still have used the tactic with even greater ingenuity. Building on an awareness of the ‘two conversations’ scenario<sup>1466</sup> they have turned religious debate into a convenient dustbin into which they can safely throw unseemly ideas they do not wish to discuss, like the god-of-the-marginals, regardless of whether they belong in a religious receptacle or not. Decidedly there are no limits to the ingenuity of civilisation clerks when it comes to the necessity of hiding the awful truth about ourselves which the Bible conveys.

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<sup>1462</sup> See above p. 59.

<sup>1463</sup> As we who are skilled in the art know well

<sup>1464</sup> Like the book of Mormon.

<sup>1465</sup> They would say tolerant.

<sup>1466</sup> See above p. 369.

### 1. *Fundamentalism*

From what I have just written it may wrongly be inferred that I seek to write off Christian fundamentalism in the same sort of way that critical scholarship habitually does. This is not the case, for though sometimes it is clear that such a fundamentalism stems from a desire to flee ideology's wearisome dialectics, where rival perspectives based on group interests lock horns in a struggle for social acceptance, just as often it appears to spring from the frustration of a burning desire to assert the superiority of the biblical viewpoint, unmatched by an ability to make a convincing case. My problem with fundamentalism is that, while I have sometimes found myself close to evangelicals when standing up to conservative or liberal establishments, in this book I have given myself the task of taking on scholarship *on its own critical terms*, which means that here there can be no place for fundamentalist arguments whether these constitute *a flight from biblical truth* or *a misguided attempt to establish this biblical truth through religion*. We are left, therefore, to deal with the mainstream conservative,<sup>1467</sup> liberal<sup>1468</sup> and radical<sup>1469</sup> positions.

### 2. *Socialism*

It could be argued that in recognising a revolutionary aspect in the Hebrew texts socialist biblicists make a significant attempt to come to terms with the Bible's ideology; the fact that they fail to recognise the important differences between class and marginal revolutions being attributed to their lack of adequately sophisticated analytical tools. Since a marginal-ideology disciple often feels bereft of allies it can be tempting to gain friends by letting such socialists off the biblical hook. However, though the marginal perspective is certainly significantly closer to the socialist position than to either liberalism or conservatism it is equally at odds with *all three civilisation standpoints* in a number of crucial ways and it is here, in the difference between the Bible's marginal perspective and all of our various civilisation points of view, that the real horror lies. To put it baldly, socialists<sup>1470</sup> find themselves almost as much at home within civilisation as liberals and conservatives do for it is only a matter of time and struggle before they establish their true place therein. Marginals, however, will *never* find such a home since their place depends on being voluntarily forgiven and accepted by those who have trashed them and not on forcibly making room for their aspirations. So in an important way socialists, when they recognise *only* the revolutionary nature of the biblical texts without identifying its true marginal character, are indeed guilty of hypocritically fleeing the Bible's truth<sup>1471</sup> and I say this against myself as one who in the past has toyed with a class-revolutionary interpretation of the Bible.

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<sup>1467</sup> Hierarchical.

<sup>1468</sup> Egalitarianism and freedom.

<sup>1469</sup> Class solidarity.

<sup>1470</sup> I am talking about true radicals here, like Marx and Engel, not armchair revolutionaries.

<sup>1471</sup> And not their true 'revolutionary' i.e. marginal nature.

### 3. *Conservatism*

If Conservatives find it relatively easy to deal with the Bible it is only because P and his friends have already cleared a path for them within it. All they have to do, therefore, is concentrate on the creation theology of Genesis 1, seeing the classical prophets as the establishers of true conservative values (dominance, obedience, responsibility and charity) and the post exilic visionaries as railing against the few establishment bad apples who will always be found in the basket whatever is done to try and prevent it. Of course, as we have shown in the case of P, this conservative cut-path is no more than an attempt to curb the ‘revolutionary’ biblical texts so as to render them bearable to those who are in power and intend to stay there. However, since it is a curb that is actually found in the texts, and not something an exegete has surreptitiously introduced, it has a sanctity which makes it much easier to persuade others that it is justified and honourable. This being the case the only real problem conservatives encounter when interpreting the Bible is of being seen as peddling slightly ridiculous, out-of-date ideas. This has recently been highlighted by the Minimalists who, perhaps because they are atheists, have had no scruples in presenting the Bible in such a pitiful guise. My grievance against them is that the conservative authoritarian ideas, which they do not themselves espouse but which they seek to attribute to the Bible as a whole, manifestly fit incredibly badly with the vast majority of the biblical texts, in spite of the considerable ingenuity they employ in trying to prove otherwise. Why Minimalists should want to rubbish texts of which they have made a life-times study beats me unless they are aware of something in them they are anxious to avoid.

### 4. *Liberalism*

Given that the conservative ‘dominion’ stance is now pretty much washed-up it is the liberal position in biblical studies which increasingly finds itself in the ascendancy. There is, however, one major problem for liberal exegetes: the fact that no one has prepared a way for them in the biblical texts. Given that there is no hope of coming across their own comforting ideas in the Bible liberals tend to look for ways of importing them. In this they have one great advantage: the fact that their principles of freedom,<sup>1472</sup> equality and fraternity, though clearly recently introduced self-serving political notions, are rarely viewed by people as such. For being the principles of the actual ruling class most people see them rather as *normal human goals shared by everyone*.<sup>1473</sup> Liberal ‘exegetes’ realise, of course, that they can’t actually claim the Biblical writers developed these ideas since anyone with a modicum of historical awareness would know this to be false. However, it is perfectly feasible for them to subtly introduce such ideas into biblical texts by pretending that they are simply talking generally about the way in which the Bible ratifies the normal human view of things. That said, there are two liberal ideas which justifiably have a place in some ancient texts: democracy and tolerance. However, as we have seen, even these Greek ideas

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<sup>1472</sup> I mean here bourgeois freedom – the freedom to compete on equal terms – not the sort of freedom the proletariat or marginals are after.

<sup>1473</sup> We have already encountered this phenomenon in the code of Hammurabi (see pp. 271-272 above) which displays a very cool, functional and apparently un-ideological approach to social order compared with the biblical codes. This is simply because its writers take it for granted that as a receptacle for the dominant conservative notions of the time their code, too, represents the normal and, indeed, only right way of seeing things.

have no place in the Bible.<sup>1474</sup> For though one knows what biblical exegetes are driving at when they describe early Israel as a democratic and tolerant community the use of such words is extremely misleading since in no way was Hebrew society democratic and tolerant in the way in which Greek society was. Indeed using Greek civilisation as the benchmark one would be obliged to judge Hebrew society as characteristically undemocratic and intolerant.

As we have seen there is one idea which liberal exegetes are forever illicitly introducing into the biblical texts: progress-and-development.<sup>1475</sup> This notion is not in fact the product of bourgeois class interests but rather of an analytical mind-set. As a result of scientific thinking humans began to appreciate that, like everything else in this world, human society is not static but in a constant state of flux, developing out of one thing and into another. Further reflection on this phenomenon brought such thinkers to see that through struggle and competition such development could bring about changes which made human society increasingly successful, judged purely in economic terms.<sup>1476</sup> It is noticeable that liberal exegetes have used this idea, which chimes in so well with their own guiding principle of free competition, to create a whole new understanding of ethics in which impossible and unrealisable ideals are said to drive forward human endeavour. As has often been said this bourgeois ethics was well summed up by the poet Robert Browning in his line: 'A man's aim must exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?' We have seen how Paul Hanson illicitly attempts to smuggle this idea of impossible ethical ideals into the Bible by vainly trying to demonstrate that Israel's pre-exilic prophets, by introducing the idea of a dialectics of faith, were responsible for the development of a new and unique ethical religion:

...the prophets were the ones who forged the visionary and realistic aspects of the religious experience into one tension-filled whole, allowing Yahwism to develop into an ethical religion in many ways unique in the ancient world.<sup>1477</sup>

The prophets didn't, of course, invent dialectics, and their ethic was in no way, shape or form remotely similar to the one Browning was talking about; Hanson only manages to make a half convincing case that it was so by kidding us all into believing that this business of impossible ethical ideas is not simply the result of our modern bourgeois way of thinking but rather the normal and indeed only true approach to the subject!

These two elements (of realism and vision) ... constitute the heart of all ethical religions.<sup>1478</sup>

Of course Hanson knows too much about the texts actually to pretend that the prophets were responsible for inventing this business of impossible ethical ideals. That would be altogether too gross. He tells us that they invented something vague which he calls 'the dialectics of faith' and leaves us to do the rest, only hinting that, of course, everyone knows that ethics is all about impossible ideals. Other liberal exegetes take a similarly

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<sup>1474</sup> See pp. 216-217, 314, 317, 442 above.

<sup>1475</sup> See above pp. 56-57, 174, 180, 201, 246, 294. 324.

<sup>1476</sup> Judged *ideologically* one would have to say that the early Hebrew society was vastly more successful than our own, wouldn't you say?

<sup>1477</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 17.

<sup>1478</sup> Hanson, *Dawn*, p. 30. See also p. 211: '... the struggle between these two elements (visionary and the realistic) goes far beyond the history of Israel's religious experience. It is a struggle basic to all ethical religions.'

oblique line in an attempt to disguise the hideous anachronism which lies at the heart of their wretched thesis:

Prophetic Christianity faces the difficulty that its penetration into the total and ultimate human situation complicates the problem of dealing with the immediate moral and social situations which all men must face. The common currency of the moral life is constituted of the "nicely calculated less and more" of the relatively good and the relatively evil. Human happiness in ordinary intercourse is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters the life and understands the interests of the neighbour. Prophetic Christianity, on the other hand, demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wresting from man the cry of distress and contrition, "The good that I would do, I do not: but the evil that I would not, that I do."<sup>1479</sup>

Here Reinhold Niebuhr deals with the classical prophets and their ethics obliquely through New Testament Christianity. However, the inference is clear: the classical prophets were the ones who invented the framework of bourgeois ethics! As Hanson has inadvertently shown, the reason why these liberals insist on importing their unrealisable ethical ideals into the Bible is so as to soften the pitiless 'revolutionary' ethics already contained therein. The prophetic visionaries, continuing to believe in the Hebrew strategy of powerlessness, of demonstration-and-exposure, argued that the post-exilic community should concentrate on rectifying previous mistakes by behaving towards one another with radical solidarity, *leaving it up to Yahweh to shame the nations and bring in his kingdom*. The priestly hierarchs poured scorn on this ridiculous and altogether unpractical approach and proactively took matters into their own hands – as civilisation folk always do. Hanson, instead of bravely facing this excruciating choice in which the Hebrew strategy, with its 'revolutionary' ethics, is pitted head on against revisionism and its conservative ethics, does a blinder; saving us all from an excruciatingly dilemma where the choice is between dealing with a truth which none of us want to face and flatly denying it. In an extraordinarily clever way he makes it possible for us apparently (and it is unfortunately only apparent) to accept the Bible's truth while still remaining untroubled by its dreadful exigencies.

#### *Liberationism and Feminism.*

Readers may wonder why I have made so little reference to liberationist and feminists biblical commentators in my three volumes. In a way I wonder about this myself! The truth is that my attitude to such writers is essentially ambiguous. For while I would hate it if anything I wrote should be conceived of as a criticism of their efforts the fact is that I am obliged to recognise that they have no more recognised the existence of the god of the marginals within the pages of the Bible than other biblical scholars have done. This has always been something of a surprise to me for I have always half-expected one of them to stumble across this extraordinary root idea which would give such sustenance to their liberation ideas. But the sad truth is that, as far as I am aware, none of them ever has done so. This means that I have to see them as participating in scholarship's general failure. In my own estimation their insights have been infinitely the poorer as a result. For while they have been unquestionably right in arguing that the Bible essentially validates all human liberationist struggles they have never been able to show that this is because it was written from a general liberationist perspective. For the truth

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<sup>1479</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935)

is that the Bible is not a liberationist text. It is a god-of-the-marginals text which, as such, has correctly been recognised as validating the liberationist struggles of all oppressed groups in human history.

We are now ready to turn, once more, to the Gospels, the question on our minds being whether New Testament scholars will prove equally clever in protecting us from the Bible's truth when it comes to having it actually played out before our eyes in a real, historical, first-century, Palestinian life.

## Chapter 21

### The Historical Jesus

In Chapter 4 I set out the three basic principles which, I believe, govern the production of a satisfactory portrait of the historical Jesus, namely:

1. It must be fully historical (i.e. ideological, not religious), eschewing unverifiable theological suppositions and working with conclusions drawn from material evidence alone.
2. It must be fully political; not excluding religious considerations but showing Jesus as a human being motivated by personal and collective interests just like the rest of us.
3. It must be fully biblical, having no truck with imported notions of a ‘new-dispensation’, seeing Jesus as fulfilling the law and the prophets, not relativising or ‘perfecting’ them.

To this we have now added a comprehensive understanding of the Hebrew Bible’s marginal ideology, witnessed to by its record of ‘revolution’ and revisionism which we ourselves have traced from Genesis through to the book of Daniel.<sup>1480</sup>

Given this ‘revolutionary’ ideology, which we have isolated in the Hebrew Bible, and the reactive strategy, identified in Jesus’ activity in the Gospels, that naturally accompanies it,<sup>1481</sup> I propose that we now take it as a working hypothesis that this rationalisation of the interests of the marginals is the ideology which the evangelists, as self-conscious ‘revolutionaries’ working within the Bible’s ‘revolutionary’ tradition themselves, saw Jesus as seeking to demonstrate in everything he said and did.

I can imagine some readers having difficulty with this idea of a radical change enduring not just throughout the timescale covered by the Bible but, indeed, ever since. In this regard it is necessary to bear in mind that a revolution is not an event that can easily be isolated in time since it constitutes a movement which only ends when either it suffers final defeat or, alternatively, finally introduces a new and stable society. This means that while it endures there is inevitably a toing and froing in its self-understanding, between the revolutionary situation of the day, the revolutionary past out of which it has materialised and the future where the hope of revolutionary vindication lies. The reason for this is not hard to understand. Unlike a political coup a revolution aims to actually *change* society rather than simply to *reorder* its structures of command, and such a transformation is extremely difficult to bring about, taking centuries to achieve, as can easily be seen in the case of our own English bourgeois revolution. Cromwell found that, hard as it was to complete the first stage of this revolution by defeating the king, it was nothing to the difficulties he faced in making the parliamentary system of government work once the king had successfully been removed. Indeed even today it is

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<sup>1480</sup> This understanding does not depend on the biblical accounts being at all points, or even in the main, historical though I certainly maintain that it is beyond belief that they were simply made up. As I have said I find the minimalists’ idea that they were put together by P and his friends quite hilarious.

<sup>1481</sup> The marginals’ option of demonstration and exposure.

not unheard of for politicians to wring their hands over the problems of getting ordinary citizens to fulfil their democratic duty by simply voting, making one wonder whether we can yet say that our bourgeois revolution has finally been vindicated. If it has taken such a long and arduous struggle to just about bring the bourgeois revolution to something like fruition it looks as if the vindication of the proletarian revolution is going to be an even more protracted business, if indeed it is ever going to succeed – and let us remind ourselves that Marx never thought it a foregone conclusion. He deemed it perfectly possible that European society would fail to meet the challenge, tear itself apart and eventually go under.

If you consider the Hebrew revolution in this light it is immediately obvious that bringing about its victory was, and indeed still continues to be, even more problematic. For everyone agrees that the advantage in adopting a strategy of coercion lies in the fact that it offers a quick fix. So if 350 years (the time it has taken for our bourgeois revolution to succeed after a fashion) is a quick fix how long will it take for the Hebrew revolution, built as it is on the alternative strategy of shaming, to be finally vindicated? I speak lightly, of course, being well aware that civilisation folk, to the extent that it has been contemplated at all, have always considered that such a revolution – whether its presence can be detected in the Bible or not – amounts to little more than pissing in the wind, making any consideration of its chances of success a monumental waste of time. However, whatever personal judgement an individual comes to on this crucial issue, and we shall be dealing with it in the final chapter, it seems to me that it cannot be denied that *if* the Bible does witness to a Hebrew revolution then we should *expect* to find within its pages a ‘revolutionary’ tradition with a lot of toing a froing between past, present and future; for that is what invariably happens in revolutionary situations, right up to the moment when they either fail or succeed.

Of course what I have proposed is only at the moment an hypothesis which needs to be verified in the normal way by ascertaining whether the Gospel texts justify it. However, if my instinct that the Bible as a whole constitutes a ‘revolutionary’ ideological unity<sup>1482</sup> is correct – in spite of everything scholars have recently attested to the contrary – then it stands to reason that all four evangelists (but not Thomas, who was rightly seen by the early Church to have broken ranks) must have been working with the core understanding that Jesus had deliberately set out to call upon his fellow countrymen, *and especially those who had for one reason or another become marginalized*, to join him in demonstrating radical solidarity, the common objective being to unmask civilisation’s hypocrisy. This would be accomplished in such a way as to enable Yahweh, god of the marginals, to ‘save the world’ by reversing the hardening of civilisation men’s and women’s hearts, thus vindicating the shaming exercise. We will now proceed to test this hypothesis – this outline sketch which I have supposed must have been the basis of the evangelists’ portraits of Jesus.<sup>1483</sup> However, it should be understood that this will inevitably involve a degree of repetition. For the fact is that

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<sup>1482</sup> Including the phenomenon of revisionism, of course.

<sup>1483</sup> As I understand it all portraits of the historical Jesus are essentially based on an ideological pattern or sketch that makes sense of the myriad individual features furnished by the texts. For all portraits of Jesus have to use the same material – the contents of the Gospels. This means that one portrait is distinguished from another simply by the way in which it ideologically patterns the common material to get it to ring with a characteristic conservative, liberal, socialist or marginal note.



we did not set out from the beginning to isolate the biblical ideology just so that it would then be possible to interpret the evangelists' account of Jesus' life in its light. The truth is that our approach has been much more roundabout. For we began with a discussion of Jesus' general strategy as evinced by all four evangelists, asking ourselves whether they show him to have been working proactively (in an attempt to perfect Torah by setting out a new-and-improved standard of behaviour) or as having adopted a revealing-and-exposing strategy designed to shame the world into changing its ways (through fulfilling the Law and the prophets). It was only *after* concluding that the Gospels, one and all, describe Jesus as consistently adopting a reactive strategy – picturing him as working from positions of openness and vulnerability rather than from defensively organised strength – that we turned to the Old Testament to see if we could find anything corresponding to such an unusual, not to say unheard of,<sup>1484</sup> approach there.

It may be suggested that what I am offering here is a classic case of the circular argument in which a supposed feature of the New Testament is used to 'prove' the existence of a similar feature in the Old Testament, which is then in turn used to 'prove' the existence of the first feature in the New Testament. But this simply isn't the case. I took great pains in my two previous books to avoid such circularity by demonstrating at length Jesus' reactive strategy in his characteristic 'story'-telling (parable-making) approach, using nothing more complicated than rigorous speech-form analysis which even a fool like me is capable of conducting on his own without scholarly assistance. *In this way I established a point of entry into the biblical texts that was entirely free of ideological prejudice, which anyone, regardless of his or her culture, race, or creed, is in a position to verify should he or she choose to do so.*

Given this roundabout approach, necessitated by our need to establish a prejudice-free entry into the biblical texts, it is quite inevitable that we should now find ourselves in the Gospels back where we began and there is no reason to be embarrassed by the fact or to wonder whether we are now obliged to demonstrate Jesus' reactive strategy *all over again*. There is no reason to suppose anything has changed while we have been away pursuing the initial stages of the self-same 'revolution' in the Old Testament. There is, however, still work to be done verifying the 'revolutionary' sketch which I have set out above, around which I believe the evangelists built their portraits of Jesus. However, a word of warning: as civilisation folk, in carrying out this exercise we shall have to keep our personal feelings about the general credibility of such a 'revolutionary' endeavour firmly in check. For inevitably our instincts will be to think that nobody with a modicum of common sense, and certainly not someone so obviously intelligent as Jesus himself, could possibly have believed anything so daft.

In testing this outline sketch I will adopt my usual methodology<sup>1485</sup> of working with the *findings*<sup>1486</sup> of twentieth century scholars even while critically examining their

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<sup>1484</sup> It wasn't actually unheard of, of course, because efforts had been made to put such a strategy into practice, admittedly somewhat unsuccessfully, by the original Hebrew 'revolutionary' community.

<sup>1485</sup> So that I can protect myself from any accusation that I 'discover' in the texts simply what I want to find

<sup>1486</sup> By 'findings' I mean the hard facts research produces.

*conclusions*<sup>1487</sup> – which in this instance will mean their very different ideologically-governed portraits. This time I have chosen four heavyweights to function both as scholarly contributors and as my ideological adversaries:- E. P. Sanders<sup>1488</sup> because he adopts a conservative stance, R. W. Funk<sup>1489</sup> and M. J. Borg<sup>1490</sup> because they take liberal positions and J. D. Crossan<sup>1491</sup> as a lone radical, it being understood that I myself read the Gospels as ‘revolutionary’ and hence marginal texts. My job will be to track these gentlemen’s findings while at the same time vigorously scrutinising their conclusions for ideological distortion.

### *Sanders and a Conservative Reading of the Gospels*

#### *Jewish salvation history*

We begin with Sanders who, as we have already seen,<sup>1492</sup> summarises the ideology of the Hebrew Bible as ‘salvation history’. For the convenience of readers I repeat his formula for the salvation-history pattern:

God called Abraham and his descendants, gave them the law through Moses, established Israel as a kingdom in the time of Saul and David, and punished Israel for disobedience by exile; he will some day raise his people again, if need be defeating their oppressors in war; many Gentiles will turn to worship him.

According to Sanders the evangelists used this pattern as an armature for their own Gospels, only slightly developing and altering it so as to take account of the fact that the Church had historically expanded more in the direction of the Gentile world than within Judaism itself. Sanders also sees Paul as adopting the same ideological approach by adapting this sketch of Jewish salvation history in his own peculiar manner:

The early Christians saw Jesus as having a major place - in fact the ultimate place - in the context of Jewish salvation history. Paul, for example, thought that it was time for the Gentiles to turn to the God of Israel, and that calling them was his own special mission.<sup>1493</sup>

#### *Jewish salvation history as a religious pattern*

In Chapter 1 I pointed out that this pattern, which Sanders claims to extract from the Old Testament, is not, at least as he presents it, properly an ideology at all since it fails to identify the character of the god in question and hence the group interests which the god represents. I am aware, of course, that many Christians, viewing ideology as a way of thinking that is sullied by sectional interest, like to pretend that a theology somehow isn’t. However, I cannot accuse Sanders of suffering from this delusion for he pointedly refuses to differentiate between theology and ideology when writing about salvation

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<sup>1487</sup> By ‘conclusions’ I mean the sense scholars make of their chosen subject matters as a result of both research and their own ideological perspectives.

<sup>1488</sup> E. P. Sanders *The Historical figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>1489</sup> R. W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

<sup>1490</sup> M. J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York).

<sup>1491</sup> J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991)

<sup>1492</sup> See p. 10 above.

<sup>1493</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 81.

history, describing it as both.<sup>1494</sup> This suggests he sees it as overtly religious (theological) in its outward expression while still, for all that, appreciably ideological at its heart. If this is his thinking, as I believe it is, it remains to us to identify the actual political colour of this salvation-history pattern since Sanders noticeably refrains from doing so himself.

In order to make a valid judgement on this matter it will be as well if we ask ourselves how centrarchical society would have viewed this so-called ‘Jewish salvation history’. In this regard it is an interesting exercise to write a salvation history for such a community and here is one I myself have created for the Akkadians:

Enlil bestowed his favours on Sargon and gave him and his descendants an empire;<sup>1495</sup> However, Marduk the god of Babylon punished Sargon for desecrating his temple, bringing ruin on the Akkadian empire<sup>1496</sup> and anarchy to the capital city Agade.<sup>1497</sup> However, some day Enlil will restore the Akkadian people by defeating their oppressors and many foreigners will turn to worship him.

I admit, of course, that the last sentence about a restoration hope is a complete fabrication since we have no evidence the Akkadians harboured such a belief. Agade never recovered, the country falling under the rule of foreigners for about a hundred years. However, I can’t help thinking that a number of them must have cherished such a hope – as clearly one Mesopotamian scribe did after his own city Ur had been destroyed.<sup>1498</sup> But in any case there is nothing about such a hope that clashes ideologically with centrarchical thinking, as the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* demonstrates.

#### *Jewish salvation history as a conservative pattern for a small and weak nation*

Such an exercise draws attention to the similarities as well as to the differences between the thinking expressed in Sanders’ Jewish salvation history and what might be called

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<sup>1494</sup> On page 80 he calls the pattern a theological construct and a theological plan. On page 81 he describes its as an ideology, an ideological construction, a theological scheme, and an ideological/theological framework.

<sup>1495</sup> ‘Enlil did not let anybody oppose Sargon, the king of the country. Enlil gave him [the region] from the Upper sea (the Mediterranean) [to] the Lower sea (the Persian gulf).’ *ANET* p. 267.

<sup>1496</sup> ‘He [Sargon] took away earth from the [foundation] pits of Babylon and he built upon it a[nother] Babylon beside the town of Agade. On account of the sacrilege he committed, the great lord Marduk became enraged and destroyed his people by hunger. From the east to the west he alienated [them] from him and inflicted upon [him] (as punishment) that he could not rest (in his grave).’ *ANET* p. 266.

<sup>1497</sup> ‘The Akkadian empire collapsed as rapidly as it had been built up. The state of anarchy in the capital was such that the Sumerian King List simply says: Who was king? Who was not?’ G. Roux *Ancient Iraq* p. 151-2.

<sup>1498</sup> See these words taken from the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*. *ANET* p. 463:

‘O Nanna, the humble who have taken thy path  
have brought unto thee their tears of the smitten house;  
before thee is their cry!  
Verily thy black-headed people who have been cast away,  
prostrate themselves unto thee!  
Verily thy city which has been made into ruins sets up a wail unto thee.  
O Nanna, may thy city which has been returned to its place,  
Step forth gloriously before thee!’

the normal centrarchical pattern of thought. For though both of them are based on the same conservative ideology of dominance Sanders' formula clearly expresses the thoughts of people who belong to a small community with little military potential. This means that they are forced to base their hopes on an illusion,<sup>1499</sup> the pretence that they are championed by an *outsized* centrarchical god who will do the dominance business *magically* for them. It seems to me therefore that that centrarchs in the ancient Near East, who clearly prided themselves in taking the initiative in military matters, would have found Sanders' Jewish salvation-history weak-kneed.<sup>1500</sup> That said I am certain they would have found nothing shocking in the conservative pattern of thought undergirding it since they too clearly espoused a conservative ideology.

*The conservative colour of Jewish salvation history confirmed by Sanders' portrait of Jesus*

But can we be absolutely certain Sanders' Jewish salvation-history pattern is underpinned by a conservative ideology of dominance?<sup>1501</sup> Since Sanders believes Jesus based his own self-awareness on this pattern we can easily check out its basic political colour by examining Sanders' portrait of Jesus:

[The] most important point that can be made about Jesus' view of himself and, in particular, of his own place in God's plan for Israel and the world, [is that he] regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God. ... From the point of view of those who were not persuaded, he was arrogant and attributed to himself a degree of authority that was most inappropriate. From the point of view of his followers and sympathizers he offered an immediate and direct route to God's love and mercy, establishing a relationship that would culminate when the kingdom fully came. Jesus was *a charismatic and autonomous prophet*; that is, his authority (in his own view and that of his followers) was not mediated by any human organization, not even by scripture. ... He did not say to potential followers, 'Study with me six hours each week, and within six years I shall teach you the true interpretation of the law.' He said, in effect, 'Give up everything you have and follow me, because I am God's agent.'<sup>1502</sup>

Jesus thought that the twelve disciples represented the tribes of Israel, but also that they would judge them. Jesus was clearly above the disciples; a person who is above the judges of Israel is very high indeed. We also know that he considered his mission as being of absolutely paramount importance, and he thought that how people responded to his message was more important than other important duties. He thought that God was about to bring in his kingdom, and that he, Jesus, was God's last emissary. He thought therefore that he was in some sense 'king'. ... I think that even 'king' is not precisely correct, since Jesus regarded God as king. My own favourite term for his conception of himself is 'viceroy'. God was king, but Jesus represented him and would represent him in the coming kingdom.<sup>1503</sup>

It is not difficult to detect behind this sketch the shadow of the *benign* centrarchical ruler who believes he can obtain the best for his community by showing his subjects mercy and understanding, thereby encouraging them to be merciful and understanding themselves. In the same manner it is not difficult to identify behind Sanders' portrait of the 'one coming', predicted by John the Baptist, the shadow of the *despotic*

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<sup>1499</sup> Which is not the same thing as a marginal 'hope against hope'.

<sup>1500</sup> i.e.: a hopelessly small community or a large one that had recently suffered catastrophic defeat.

<sup>1501</sup> It is, of course, perfectly possible to produce a salvation history that is not based on such conservative thought forms.

<sup>1502</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 238-9.

<sup>1503</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 248.

centrarchical ruler who seeks the good of the community by threatening his subjects with a big stick:

John ... warned people to repent in view of 'the coming wrath'. 'The axe is already laid at the root of the tree' (Matt. 3. 10 // Luke 3.9). ... According to the gospels, Jesus began his active ministry after being baptized by John. That he accepted John's baptism is virtually certain.<sup>1504</sup>

Jesus favoured repentance, but, if we classify him as a type, and describe how he saw his mission, we shall conclude that he was not a repentance-minded reformer. In the New Testament that title clearly belongs to the Baptist. Jesus was conscious of his differences from John... Jesus, I think, was a good deal more radical ... [He] thought that John's call to repent should have been effective but in fact it was only partially successful. His own style was in any case different; he did not repeat the Baptist's tactics. On the contrary, he ate and drank with the wicked and told them that God especially loved them, and that the kingdom was at hand. Did he hope that they would change their ways? Probably he did. But 'change now or be destroyed was not his message. Jesus' was, 'God loves you.'<sup>1505</sup>

These portraits amply confirm that there is indeed a conservative ideology underlying Sanders' 'Jewish salvation history'. This means that we can now classify it as a revisionist pattern which in so far as it has any place in the Bible (a matter still to be settled) can only, at best be alongside the contributions of P and his friends.

Now I cannot deny that such a pattern of thought *may* have existed in Jesus' day since, according to my alternative 'revolutionary' pattern, it was just the sort of conservative revisionist thinking he challenged in everything he said and did. So the question we are faced with is this. Is Sanders right in maintaining Jesus himself operated with this conservative pattern of thought and that he and the evangelists who wrote about him were just a bunch of revisionists too? In attempting to answer this question we have to be very aware of the danger of simply appealing to our own prejudices. It is not difficult to understand why some people feel drawn to Sanders' portrait of Jesus. For even if many of us see it as harking back to a feudalistic world that has, fortunately, largely disappeared it is nonetheless evident that it still attracts those who seek justification for their own hierarchical positions within society as well as those who, on the contrary, only look for a quiet life. Indeed if the last century has demonstrated anything it is that nowadays constituencies exist for conservative, liberal *and* radical portraits of Jesus; that is the nature of our society as things stand. Since it is clearly the case that we no longer all think ideologically in the same way it has increasingly become obvious that passing judgement on the Bible simply by referring to shared political instincts is not a scientific approach, however widespread it might still be. For who am I to say that Sanders' conservative portrait of Jesus must be wrong simply because I do not find the person he describes in the least bit attractive? Maybe Jesus was a revisionist and maybe I would not have particularly liked him. Many people didn't, after all.

Given, first, that political instinct can no longer be our judge and, second, that scholars have shown themselves capable of using the biblical material to produce any number of reasonably convincing patterns built on contradictory conservative, liberal and socialist lines, how are we to proceed? Though the religious dream has always been to discover

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<sup>1504</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 93-4.

<sup>1505</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 233.

a Jesus who somehow manages to be all things to all people, a moment's consideration should be enough to make one realise this is self-delusion on a grand scale. It seems to me therefore that even though we have before us, by dint of a hundred years of scholarship, three basic patterns that can, with some ingenuity, be made to fit the Gospel material *moderately well*, we are obliged to recognise that only one of them can possibly fit *properly*, though, of course, it may well turn out that none of them do. Indeed my own argument has been that in portraying Jesus as operating with a proactive strategy *all of these civilisation patterns are clearly at odds with the Gospels* which take pains to highlight Jesus' *reactive* strategy; a strategy which is only explicable in someone working on a marginal, and hence non-civilisation basis.<sup>1506</sup> This is why I have suggested that the real truth is that we have *four* patterns to deal with, not three – conservative, liberal, socialist *and* marginal.

In deciding which, if any, of these patterns properly accords with the evangelists' accounts we must paradoxically concentrate attention on areas where a fit appears problematic. It was, after all, the realisation that none of the proactive portraits offered by twentieth century scholarship fit with the reactive strategy witnessed to in Jesus' parable-making that started me off on my quest.<sup>1507</sup> The major complication in dealing with bad fits in this context is that quite inevitably the Gospels as we have them contain material that has suffered a degree of damage. This means that the fact that a given pattern does not at first sight match the Gospel material may simply be due to a fault in transmission, like an old jigsaw puzzle in which one of the pieces has been chewed by some child or family pet! I found this to be true, for example, in the case of the parables<sup>1508</sup> since it became evident to me that these must have been collected by the early Church as free-floating 'stories' detached from their contexts which is to say in a form which deprived them of their original meanings thus rendering it necessary for the evangelists to find ways of making sense of them before fitting them into their texts. However, this difficulty should not be overstressed since, as with a jig-saw puzzle, it is usually reasonably easy to distinguish between misfits due to incidental damage and misfits due to an attempt to marry what do not rightly go together.

### *Criticism of Sanders' Conservative Reading of the Gospels*

So what evidence is there that Sanders' sketch of the historical Jesus fails to accord with the Gospel material?

#### *1. Jewish salvation history misunderstands Jesus' use of parables and falsifies his fundamental strategy.*

At the risk of repeating myself<sup>1509</sup> let me start by drawing attention to the fact that, like almost every other twentieth century scholar, Sanders offers us a proactive portrait which, in agreement with his conservative ideological position, presents Jesus as

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<sup>1506</sup> Class struggle can involve appeals to conscience, of course. However, at the end of the day everything hinges on organising a coercive force, which is to say with a proactive strategy.

<sup>1507</sup> I started out on this quest as a ten year old, though of course my reference then was not twentieth century scholarship but rather my teachers at school.

<sup>1508</sup> See my work *Light Denied*. Chapters 1-3.

<sup>1509</sup> See my work *Light Denied*, Appendix E p. 351.

working consistently from a position of strength. This can best be seen, unsurprisingly enough, in his treatment of the parables which he clearly takes as constituting authoritative pronouncements about how Jesus sees things from his standpoint as God's final spokesman. Here, for example, is Sanders' combined understanding of the parables of 'The Labourers' Wages' (Mt 20.1), and 'The Banquet' (Mt 22.2; Lk 14.16):

Do not assume that God will act in ways you can predict. God can be surprisingly generous (the first parable), and also surprisingly indiscriminating (the second). You do not know whom he will count 'in' and whom not. Just because you are a person of rank and long service, you should not suppose that he values you alone; nor should you suppose that his kingdom will not come if you say you are not ready. It is coming, and God will include whom he will, 'both bad and good' (the quoted phrase is from Matt. 22.10)

Regardless of the particular sense which Sanders makes of these stories (a matter of indifference to me since whatever he produces can at best only be speculation<sup>1510</sup>) I maintain that they cannot possibly be used as evidence that Jesus went about making *authoritative* statements on behalf of his patron god, as Sanders suggests. The reason I say this is that a parable as an illustrative speech-form is incapable of doing such a thing<sup>1511</sup> – a fact Sanders, along with many others, ignores. Indeed parables, in essentially illuminating and exposing, function in a *non-authoritarian* manner. They are therefore the chosen arm of those who do not aim to impose their will on others but rather seek to empower them by getting them to realise the mistakes they are making and so change their ways. Consequently, though a successful parable-maker, like Jesus, is rightly seen as a person displaying authority,<sup>1512</sup> it is an authority due to the fact that he or she obviously knows the score, not an authority which derives from the fact that he or she is recognised as a spokesperson for some centrarchal power, whether human or divine. In other words the authority of successful parable-makers is due to their seeing matters clearly, free of all hypocrisy and pretence – as, for example, through the eyes of a marginal. As such, it is decidedly not the kind of authority which results from having a special relationship with a conservative overlord – as in the case of Sanders' Jewish salvation history.

So poor old Sanders' horse falls at the first fence! Parables are manifestly not capable of delivering authoritative pronouncements emanating from a centrarchal god, as the 'Jewish salvation history' pattern requires. What is more, the Gospels do not present Jesus as wandering around bossing people about, telling them what to do and what to believe in the nicest possible way. As John makes all too plain they present him, on the contrary, as the god of the marginals' light; as the one who by demonstrating what living in radical solidarity means exposes, some would say rather cruelly, the hypocrisy and pretence of first century men and women.

## 2. *Jewish 'salvation-history' misunderstands Jesus' mission as presented by the Gospels.*

Using his Jewish salvation-history pattern, in which Jesus is presented as the benign viceroy of a merciful, centrarchal god, Sanders finds no difficulty in taking on board

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<sup>1510</sup> In determining Jesus' strategy Sanders should be no more concerned with my speculations about the meaning of any given parable than I am concerned by his speculations as to its meaning.

<sup>1511</sup> See *Light Denied*, pp. 12-14, 19 and Chapter 3.

<sup>1512</sup> Mk 1.22.

the fact that the Gospels describe Jesus as welcoming marginals<sup>1513</sup> into his movement. However, one thing the pattern is unable to deal with is the fact that the Gospels report Jesus as saying that marginals were *better placed* than righteous folk to enter the kingdom. Notice how Sanders carefully avoids this issue:

Jesus told the tax collectors that God loved them, and he told other people that the tax collectors would enter the kingdom of God before righteous people did. That is, he seems to have said, in effect, that if they accepted him and his message, God would include them in the kingdom - even though they had not repented and reformed in the way the law requires (repayment, 20 per cent fine, guilt offering).<sup>1514</sup>

Sanders also seems a bit mystified as to why the Gospels describe Jesus as failing to include urban areas in his mission to all Israel. His perplexity is understandable since such a tactic does not easily fit with his Jewish salvation-history pattern, as he himself admits.

It is difficult to know just how much to make of Jesus' avoidance (as it appears to be) of the urban centres. ... [H]e offered the kingdom to outcasts and sinners, including tax collectors and prostitutes. One would think that such a mission would have taken him to Tiberias, the capital city. He might have gone to Sepphoris to protest against the wealth of the aristocracy. A desire to summon all Israel might have sent him to the major population centres. Yet Jesus worked among his own: the residents of villages, people who were minor artisans, tradesmen, farmers and fishermen.

He may have done this simply because they were his own. He identified with the meek and lowly, and they were the natural focus of his mission. Further, he, like many prophets and visionaries, did not calculate in our terms. ... When he thought about 'all Israel', he did not count noses and ask, 'How can I reach the greatest number of my people most efficiently?' He .. thought in symbolic .. representative terms ...<sup>1515</sup>

All of this is a dead give-away, of course. The idea that Jesus eschewed going into towns like Tiberias and Sepphoris because he was more at home with country folk whom he saw as being meek and lowly like himself makes him out to be at best timid and at worst a coward. This is an altogether absurd hypothesis whichever way you look at it, as indeed is Sanders' other suggestion: that Jesus' representative mind-set made him incapable of forming a realistic strategy. I am prepared, up to a point, to accept the possibility that I might not have found Jesus particularly attractive but that he was a timid country bumpkin out of touch with reality is not an hypothesis I am prepared to countenance even for a minute, given his general conduct.<sup>1516</sup>

These two undeniable features found in the evangelists' work, which cannot easily, if at all, be made to square with the salvation-history pattern (Jesus advantaging marginals and his avoidance of urban centres), clearly create a real problem for Sanders which he seems unable to deal with in a satisfactory manner. It should be understood that this is a problem which stems not from the Gospel writers' material but from Sanders' determination to impose his salvation-history pattern on their work. This being the case if we throw away his pattern and substitute our own marginal one in its place the problem unsurprisingly disappears. What is more, Jesus himself is revealed as perfectly

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<sup>1513</sup> 'outcasts and sinners including tax collectors and prostitutes' Sanders, *Figure* p. 106.

<sup>1514</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 236.

<sup>1515</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 106-7.

<sup>1516</sup> If people like Josephus who also used messianic imagery were none-the-less manifestly capable of thinking strategically one wonders why Sanders believes Jesus wasn't.



intelligent and his thinking as crystal clear even though devilishly hard for civilisation men and women, like us, to accept:

- Jesus claimed marginals were better placed than the righteous to enter the Kingdom for the selfsame reason that Yahweh had chosen Israel rather than some other nation. Israel was ‘chosen’ to perform as the light to lighten the Gentiles because only marginals had eyes capable of identifying the malaise undermining civilisation (the thirst for privilege and the trashing of those who get in the way) and the motivation to do something about it. Righteous folk were not chosen because they are not even aware of the problem, let alone capable of doing anything about it. Indeed when anyone, like Jesus himself, tries to unmask civilisation’s fundamental malaise the instinct of righteous folk is to hush him or her up.
- Jesus avoided the urban centres in Galilee because the communities within them were mixed. His task was to call on his fellow countrymen to join him in demonstrating to the world what a community functioning in radical solidarity looked like. *Naturally, therefore, he went to areas in which Jews were already living together in a community*, which is to say the small towns and villages in Galilee and Judea, Jerusalem itself constituting the natural focus of his overall campaign.

The result of using our marginal pattern suggests that Jesus’ *strategy* (as opposed to his natural form of expression) was not in the least bit symbolic or representative. Sanders’ claim that Jesus was somehow unwilling or unable to make rational strategic calculations (count noses) is simply weird. Only a madman (or someone as desperate for a way out as Sanders) would dream up the idea of *a representative strategy*, a crazy idea and a contradiction in terms. All Sanders achieves in making such a claim in the defence of ‘Jewish salvation history’ is to demonstrate just how ill-fitting his conservative model is.

### 3. *Jewish salvation history misunderstands Jesus’ attitude to repentance.*

Sanders notes that though Luke portrays Jesus as being concerned with repentance the other evangelists strangely don’t. Since John the Baptist, along with Judaism and early Christianity, made repentance a central issue Sanders concludes everything suggests Jesus didn’t.<sup>1517</sup> He offers us a sort of ‘good-cop’ ‘bad-cop’ explanation for this odd state of affairs, suggesting that whereas John the Baptist exemplified the tyrannical spokesman for the centrarchal God, Jesus exemplified the benevolent alternative:

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<sup>1517</sup> The most reasonable explanation [of the absence of the notion of repentance in Mark and Matthew and its presence in Luke and Acts] is that the author of Luke/Acts especially liked to emphasize repentance, and that it was not one of the major themes of Jesus’ own message. I realize that this strikes the reader as odd, since everyone, whether religious or not, thinks of repentance as a major and fundamental element of religion. And so it is. Repentance was a main theme in Judaism and later in early Christianity. It has continued as a dominant feature of both religions. It is, therefore, striking that repentance plays so small a part in the teaching of Jesus according to Matthew and Mark. Its small role in these two gospels becomes all the more remarkable when we note that both use the word in their summaries of Jesus’ teaching (Mark 1. 15; Matthew 4. 15 [17?]). They had no interest themselves in downplaying it; yet it is a minor theme. What is the explanation?’ Sanders, *Figure* p. 232.

... 'change now or be destroyed' was not [Jesus'] message, it was John's. Jesus' was, 'God loves you'. ... This good news about God is potentially a much more powerful message than a standard exhortation to give up wickedness and turn over a new leaf. In a world that believed in God and judgement, some people nevertheless lived as if there were no God. They must have had some anxiety about this in the dark watches in the night. The message that God loves them anyway might transform their lives.<sup>1518</sup>

I suppose some may find this explanation convincing I, however, am not of their number. It is difficult to believe Jesus' genius was in offering the world a more positive pedagogy than had previously been available. Everyone is aware that the 'good cop' 'bad cop' phenomenon stands for a *team* effort, indicating that people do not see them as *alternatives* but rather as *complements*. In other words the underlying rationale is that in certain circumstances subjects respond better to one approach than to the other but that both have their uses. This being the case it is not a question of one approach being superior to the other,<sup>1519</sup> but that any centrarch in the ancient world worth his salt would have included both tactics in his armoury. This being the case it is hard to take seriously the idea that Jesus was the one responsible for introducing the 'good cop' idea to the world and impossible to believe that he advocated a new religion in which the 'good-cop' stood alone, the 'bad-cop' having been banished, unless for some reason he had flipped his lid and lost his place, politically speaking. Since this was clearly not the case Sanders' horse appears to fall at this fence too.

What happens if we see things from the perspective offered by the marginal pattern? I note Sanders' awareness that civilization (his word is religion, see note 1517 above) has always been preoccupied with the need for repentance. It is the reason why he knows only too well that his own readers will be shocked when he tells them it was not one of Jesus' concerns. However, what he says does not surprise me in the least since I see Jesus as advocating marginal themes, not civilisation themes. There was a repentance which I believe Jesus was truly interested in: *the repentance of the righteous*. However, this is not the sort of repentance Sanders and his conservative constituents tend to worry about, understandably enough since they themselves constitute the righteous! Jesus' concern as regards repentance was with the beam all of us civilisation folk carry about in our eye, making proper ethical judgement impossible; not a repentance having to do with the speck we civilisation folk find in the marginal's eye and collectively turn into a mountain. However, for reasons even Sanders must surely appreciate, it would have been counterproductive for Jesus to openly advocate repentance of the righteous since doing so would have made confusion worse confounded. Sanders is right, of course, that Jesus would have wanted marginals to cease from sinning but he certainly wouldn't have made an issue of it since, from his marginal point of view, *that would have been to focus on the wrong sort of repentance his concern being with a change of heart that needed to take place amongst those who were generally considered as just*. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he chose to make his point using other concepts, reversal (first last, last first) being one of them.

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<sup>1518</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 233-4

<sup>1519</sup> 'a much more powerful message'

4. *Jewish salvation history misunderstands Jesus' attitude towards Gentiles*  
Sanders is frankly puzzled by Jesus' attitude towards foreigners. He notes that all of the evangelists were in favour of the mission to the Gentiles and so would have included any favourable mention Jesus had made of them in their Gospels. However, he correctly notes the paucity of such passages and the fact that those which do exist show that Jesus did not see Gentiles as significant in his endeavour.<sup>1520</sup> The trouble for Sanders is that this scenario cannot easily be made to square with his Jewish salvation-history pattern in which Gentiles are either seen as constituting an obstacle to be removed or as fresh converts to be welcomed:

If Israel were to become great again, obviously Gentile nations had to diminish or be weakened. Consequently, some hopes for the restoration of Israel were tied up with the belief that God would defeat the Gentiles who governed the kingdoms of this world. Many Jews, however, hoped that the Gentiles would be converted: that they would turn to the God of Israel and come to Mount Zion, bringing offerings to the Temple. ... Did Jesus share the hope that in the new age Gentiles would worship the God of Israel?<sup>1521</sup>

Consequently Sanders can only answer his own question very lamely by suggesting that though Jesus 'made no effort to seek to win Gentiles' he must surely have expected 'at least some Gentiles to turn to the God of Israel and to participate in the coming kingdom' since he was 'a kind and generous man'!<sup>1522</sup> I am amazed at this statement for I would never dream of justifying anything about the 'revolution' pattern on the strength that Jesus was a nice person. Fortunately there is no such need since the 'revolution' pattern answers all of Sanders' questions perfectly simply and straightforwardly without help from me.

- Of course Jesus saw the Gentiles as marginal to his work since his business was with calling on all Israel to join him in demonstrating radical solidarity as a community.
- Of course the evangelists knew Jesus would have approved of their mission to the Gentiles since the whole object of his exercise in demonstrating radical solidarity was to soften Gentile hearts.

In other words the features which Sanders quite correctly identifies in the Gospels concerning Jesus' and the evangelists' attitudes towards the Gentiles are exactly what you would expect given a 'revolutionary' perspective. This data only becomes problematic when you attempt to impose Sanders' alternative, Jewish salvation-history pattern on the texts.

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<sup>1520</sup> 'What is striking is that the evangelists had so few passages that pointed towards success in winning Gentiles to faith. ... Jesus' own mission was to Israel, and especially to the 'lost sheep' of Israel. He made no effort to seek and win Gentiles.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 192.

<sup>1521</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 191.

<sup>1522</sup> 'On general grounds, I am inclined to think that he expected at least some Gentiles to turn to the God of Israel and to participate in the coming kingdom. The general grounds are these: a good number of Jews expected this to happen; Jesus was a kind and generous man. That is, the alternative to thinking that Jesus looked forward to the conversion of Gentiles would be that he expected them all to be destroyed. This is unlikely.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 192.

5. *Jewish salvation history misunderstands the nature of redemption.*

*Creation* and *recreation* (often spoken of as *redemption* or *restoration*) are the two foundational ideas of all conservative theologies. This can be seen not simply in Genesis 1 where a creation story is the means by which the very idea of centrarchical authority itself is definitively established but also in Ezekiel, Haggai and Zechariah 1-8. Here redemption, in the form of a story about the setting up of a new righteous community, is the means by which a certain ruling elite is seen to be endowed with authority over a particular community established in a specific land. It is unsurprising therefore to discover Sanders, along with other conservative biblical ideologues,<sup>1523</sup> making strenuous efforts to find room for the idea of redemption within the Gospels themselves. I must immediately make it clear that it is not my intention to try and make out that the ideas of creation and redemption are absent from the Gospels, anymore than I have previously argued that the idea of creation is absent from Genesis 2-3 or that the idea of redemption is absent from second and third Isaiah. My argument is a little more subtle. It is that creation and redemption mean quite different things when used in conjunction with texts having different ideological colourings. Thus, for example, creation in Genesis 1 means a centrarchical god's establishment of a world order governed by authority, whereas the same word used in connection with Genesis 2-3 means the needless establishment, by the metacosmological god of the marginals, of a locus or habitat in which the creatures he has created can live out their lives in accordance with the different natures he has given them. The fact that an identical or similar word like creation is used in both texts should not be taken as meaning that the same reality is being discussed since manifestly this isn't the case. This is equally true when dealing with redemption, especially since the word itself is seldom used in the Gospels<sup>1524</sup> and is very rarely employed in the Jewish Bible to mean the recreation of a new righteous community.

As I see it, the idea of redemption used in connection with Ezekiel basically means Yahweh's saving of Israel from herself, as a sinful and disobedient nation, so as to be herself, as a righteous and faithful nation. On the other hand redemption used in connection with Second Isaiah means something altogether different: Yahweh's forgiveness of Israel and offer of a second chance to do the job he had given her (i.e. to be the light to lighten the Gentiles). I have clarified this difference by comparing redemption in Ezekiel with redemption in Second Isaiah. However, given the fact that it is at bottom ideological the very same distinction could be made between redemption in Haggai and redemption in third Isaiah, or indeed between redemption in Zechariah 1-8 and redemption in Zechariah 9-15. The radical difference between these two concepts, so confusingly referred to by the same 'redemption' name, is that whereas the revisionists centre attention on the destiny of Israel the 'revolutionaries' centre attention on the destiny of the world and on Israel's special task in bringing this about. In fact, at the extreme limit it could be said that for the 'revolutionaries' Israel herself is seen as a *dispensable* item since in the terms of the 'revolutionary' pattern it would be perfectly feasible for Yahweh to jettison Israel if she proved inadequate to the task and choose some other marginal community for his purpose. This is something *quite inconceivable*

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<sup>1523</sup> e.g. N. T. Wright.

<sup>1524</sup> 4 times, all in Luke 1.68, 2.38, 21.28, 24.21.

when talking about redemption in a revisionist context since you can only save someone from themselves by continually trying and refusing to give up until success is achieved. Here then we have a hard and fast way of distinguishing between ‘revolutionary’ redemption and revisionist redemption.

So which kind of redemption are we dealing with in the Gospels, given that we are talking about a word used by biblical ideologues to identify an idea in the texts which does not necessarily appear under that name? In discussing Jesus’ career Sanders begins by highlighting redemption in John the Baptist’s teaching:

John preached righteousness and piety, especially urging repentance of transgressions against other people and God, and warning that in the judgement, *which was near at hand*, those who did not repent would be punished or destroyed. ... The proclamation of the coming judgement was accompanied by the prediction that *God was about to redeem Israel*, as promised by Isaiah (Mark 1.6; also Matthew and Luke). This led people to think that the redemption was at hand.<sup>1525</sup>

Here Sanders makes it clear that, as Mark sees it, John the Baptist’s understanding of redemption is based on Second Isaiah’s thinking. But how does Sanders himself understand it? This is how he continues:

The idea of redemption made some people think that they might lend God a hand and strike the first blow against immoral rulers. Antipas saw the threat and had John executed. That is, if we combine Antipas' fear of insurrection (Josephus) and John's prediction of a dramatic future event that would transform the present order (the gospels), we find a perfectly good reason for the execution. ... It should be recalled that Antipas was on the whole a good ruler, who did not wantonly execute people just because they favoured righteousness. I think that we should maintain Josephus' view, that the issue concerned the safety of the realm. But for the contents of the Baptist's message we must rely on the gospels, since Josephus' summary tells us nothing and the account in the gospels makes very good sense of the execution. Enthusiasm about a coming new order made rulers very uneasy. Throughout his writings, Josephus systematically deleted information about Jewish hopes for redemption, since such hopes had possible political and military repercussions, and he wished to present his people as not threatening the *pax Romana*.

From what he says here it is clear that Sanders sees Josephus and Antipas along with other unnamed Jews as viewing redemption in a revisionist manner: as the resurgence of Israel as an independent nation and the vanquishing of her foreign rulers. However Sanders is curiously silent about John’s own thinking. The fact is, of course, that there is no doubt what John thought. For not only do we have Mark’s testimony that his thinking was based on Second Isaiah, in which the ‘revolutionary’ understanding of redemption as Israel’s second chance to do her job in being God’s light is very clearly set out, but we also have two recorded statements of John himself which make his ‘revolutionary’ position only too plain.

‘...do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the foot of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.’<sup>1526</sup>

In both of these remarks John emphatically highlights Israel’s *dispensability* in a way that leaves no room for argument. It is interesting therefore to note that while Sanders quotes both of these texts he signally fails on each occasion to draw the all too obvious

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<sup>1525</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 92-3.

<sup>1526</sup> Mt 3.9-10. See also Lk 3.8-9.

conclusion: *that John must have thought about redemption in a 'revolutionary' manner incompatible with Jewish salvation history.*<sup>1527</sup>

When it comes to Jesus' own thinking Sanders loses all reticence. He makes it perfectly clear he sees Jesus as thinking about redemption in a revisionist manner compatible with Jewish salvation history:

In calling disciples, and in speaking of them as 'the Twelve', Jesus intended to show that he had in view the full restoration of the people of Israel.<sup>1528</sup>

The gospels set the story of Jesus in the context of Jewish salvation history: God called the people of Israel and would ultimately redeem them. Jesus saw his own work in the same context. His message was, in part, that in the coming kingdom the twelve tribes would have a place.<sup>1529</sup>

Jesus' hope for the kingdom fits into long-standing and deeply held hopes among the Jews, who continued to look for God to redeem his people and constitute a new kingdom, one in which Israel would be secure and peaceful, and one in which Gentiles would serve the God of Israel.<sup>1530</sup>

Jesus harboured traditional thoughts about God and Israel: God had chosen all Israel, and he would some day redeem the nation.<sup>1531</sup>

In none of these citations does Sanders give any hint at all that he sees Jesus as thinking in global terms in which Israel operates as God's light and salvation comes by way of God softening of Gentile hearts. Indeed Sanders openly states that he sees Jesus as expecting from God nothing less than a miraculous turn of events which would confound political reality:

Those who looked for the restoration of the twelve tribes expected a miracle, ... Jesus seems to have shared this hope: the hope for a miracle that would re-create Israel.<sup>1532</sup>

The fact that understanding Jesus in terms of Jewish salvation history makes him out to be a conceited fool who was shown by events to be deluded does not seem to worry Sanders, which only goes to show how desperate one can become when trying to read the Gospels through conservatives spectacles.

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<sup>1527</sup> 'According to Matthew, Jesus was descended from Abraham and David (Matt 1.1). His birth fulfilled a prophecy that the ruler of Israel would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David(2.6). In the earliest scene from the period of Jesus' adulthood, Matthew has John the Baptist warn his hearers not to count on the fact that they are Abraham's descendants (3.9 also Lk 3.8).' Sanders, *Figure* p. 81. 'John, therefore, warned people to repent in view of 'the coming wrath'. 'The axe is already laid at the root of the tree' (Matt. 3. 10 // Luke 3.9). This message is usually called eschatological. *Eschatos* in Greek means 'last', and thus eschatology is 'discourse or thought about last things'. The term can be misleading when it is translated literally. Most Jews who thought that judgement and redemption were at hand expected the world to continue. God would do something dramatic; he would transform the order of things; but then he would reign, either directly or through a viceroy, such as the Messiah of Aaron in the Dead Sea Scrolls. We cannot say in detail what the Baptist expected, but evidently it was a dramatic future event that would change the present order.; Sanders, *Figure* p. 93.

<sup>1528</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 120.

<sup>1529</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 122.

<sup>1530</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 193

<sup>1531</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 193

<sup>1532</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 185.

6. *Jewish salvation history misunderstands the opposition Jesus created*

Another difficulty Sanders openly admits to is in finding a way to explain why the Gospels claim Jesus angered people by consorting with marginals (publicans and sinners). Sanders rightly points out that most New Testament commentators follow Luke in assuming that Jesus' aim in seeking out marginals was to try and get them to reform and change their ways.<sup>1533</sup> There are three basic problems with this scenario, as he rightly points out. First, Luke is the only evangelist to claim Jesus was a reformer concerned with repentance<sup>1534</sup> and while it is easy to understand why an evangelist might make up such an explanation, given civilisation folks' views on the matter, it is impossible to understand why three out of four evangelists would have ignored it had it been true. Second, had Jesus been a reformer he would have been obliged to create rules concerning marginals who sought to return to the fold, just as Moses, as lawgiver, had done. However, no such regulations exist.<sup>1535</sup> The third problem with the reformist scenario is that civilisation folk would naturally have applauded any effort to get marginals to repent, especially if such efforts were successful.<sup>1536</sup> This makes it very odd indeed that the evangelists claim Jesus was criticised for such conduct.

Sanders believes he has the answer to this conundrum, an answer which, moreover, explains the terrible opposition Jesus created and which eventually led to his death. He argues that Jesus upstaged the conservative Jewish authorities by claiming that his business took precedence over the Law and its established procedures and consequently he himself over the Jewish leaders as the Law's operatives, since his authority as viceroy came directly from God. It was this thinking, so Sanders' maintains, that led Jesus to conclude that, as concerns marginals, following him took precedence over the well-known procedures concerning sinners who wished to repent so as to be able to return to the community. And it was this 'arrogance' which, unsurprisingly enough, made the Jewish authority determined to be rid of Jesus:

Here we see how radical Jesus was: far more radical than someone who simply committed minor infringements of the Sabbath and food laws. Both far more radical and far more arrogant, in the common view. He seems to have thought that those who followed him belonged to God's elect, even though they did not do what the Bible itself requires.<sup>1537</sup>

This view of himself and of the vital importance of his mission was offensive in a general sense - not because he opposed obedience to the law, but because he regarded his own mission as what really counted. If the most important thing that people could do was to accept him, the importance of other demands was reduced, even though Jesus did not say that those demands were invalid.<sup>1538</sup>

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<sup>1533</sup> 'Most interpreters of the New Testament assume that Luke's story of Zacchaeus reveals Jesus' aim: he wanted the tax collectors to repent, to repay what they had stolen, to add a further payment of 20 per cent as a penalty, and to give up their dishonest practice.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 236.

<sup>1534</sup> '... only Luke presents Jesus as a reformer.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 236.

<sup>1535</sup> 'Were [Jesus] a reformer of society, he would have had to face the problem of integrating wicked people into a more righteous social group. Then there would have had to be explicit rules about the parameters of behaviour, and also some sort of policy on sources of income. None of this exists.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 234.

<sup>1536</sup> '... no one would have objected if Jesus persuaded tax collectors to leave the ranks of the wicked: everybody else would have benefited. If he were a successful reformer of dishonest tax collectors, Jesus would not have drawn criticism.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 236.

<sup>1537</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 235.

<sup>1538</sup> Sanders, *Figure* p. 237.

What we see here is Sanders arguing that Jesus, as a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, pulled rank on his conservative opponents as fellow aspirants to leadership in the conservative community.<sup>1539</sup> It is a clever argument, I admit, but is he right?

Once again it is important to refrain from attacking Sanders by appealing to our own prejudice. We may well find the fact that he draws a portrait which makes Jesus out to be an extreme right-wing conservative, albeit of a very caring kind, thoroughly objectionable. However, prejudice is not persuasive and we must stick to rational argument. Sanders bases his understanding of Jesus' attitude towards marginals on two planks.<sup>1540</sup>

- 1) Jesus told the tax collectors that God loved them.
- 2) Jesus told other people that if tax collectors accepted him and his message, God would include them in the kingdom - even though they had not repented and reformed in the way the law requires.

Unfortunately for him neither of these statements can be justified on textual grounds. As I have already shown, Jesus did not tell tax collectors that if they accepted him and his message, God would include them in the kingdom – even though they had not repented and reformed in the way the law requires. In fact, as far as we know he said nothing whatsoever about the law concerning repentant tax collectors, so this is simply something Sanders has dreamed up. What Jesus actually said, as Sanders is well aware, was that tax collectors would enter the kingdom of God before righteous people did. This is not by any conceivable means the same thing as saying that God was willing to include marginals as well as righteous folk in his kingdom without requiring them to go through the necessary procedure, as Sanders brazenly pretends. For it is clearly a way of saying something vastly more surprising and embarrassing for righteous folk, as I have already pointed out above.<sup>1541</sup>

However, it is Sanders' other plank that at this point interests me most. The statement that 'Jesus told tax collectors that God loved them' is something which most of Sanders' readers will simply take for granted, not because it is found in the texts, which isn't the case, but simply because it is a lie often repeated by conservative Christians over the centuries. Sanders' doesn't elucidate his thinking here so we are on our own; however, if you think about it for a moment, in the mouth of a conservative the idea that Jesus told tax collectors that God loved them is basically tied up with the civilisation idea that God is in the business of getting bad people to repent.<sup>1542</sup> It is in

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<sup>1539</sup> 'Through him, Jesus held, God was acting directly and immediately, bypassing the agreed, biblically sanctioned ordinances, reaching out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel with no more mediation than the words and deeds of one man - himself. This, at least, is the most obvious inference to draw from the passages about the wicked. This view of himself and of the vital importance of his mission was offensive in a general sense - not because he opposed obedience to the law, but because he regarded his own mission as what really counted. If the most important thing that people could do was to accept him, the importance of other demands was reduced, even though Jesus did not say that those demands were invalid.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 236-7.

<sup>1540</sup> See p. 473 above.

<sup>1541</sup> See pp. 474-475 above.

<sup>1542</sup> In the mouth of a liberal the phrase 'Jesus told tax collectors God loved them' is understood quite differently. Here it means that God wills them to be self confident so that they too can become participants in the free-competition game. This is a reading we can safely exclude in Sanders' case.



fact a typical ‘good cop’ remark, spoken in the hope that loving people will prove more persuasive in getting them back into line than threatening them with punishment. The trouble is that Sanders does not see the glaring inconsistency in arguing on the one hand that Jesus was a loving good cop and on the other that he was not concerned that the wicked should repent. For the fact is that there is no conceivable reason for having a good cop or any cop at all for that matter if repentance of the wicked (as opposed to repentance of the righteous) is not the issue. It would seem therefore that Sanders is completely up a gum tree here too.

Since it turns out that Sanders’ thesis is not worth the paper it is printed on how do we make sense of the opposition Jesus undoubtedly created? If Jesus aroused implacable hatred it was precisely because he both *said* that marginals were better placed to enter the kingdom than the righteous and *meant* it. Such a statement was tantamount to suggesting that only marginals were capable of seeing what was wrong with civilisation and only they had the motivation to do something about it. *In other words righteous people could only enter the kingdom by recognising their dependence on the vision of people they considered as trash.* You only have to seriously consider such a proposition for a moment to understand how insufferable righteous people would have found the one who put it forward – especially as he was clearly serious and, worse still, probably right – and I am talking about *truly* righteous people here for scholars correctly remind us that the scribes and Pharisees were far more worthy of such an appellation than most of us whether we be Christian or Atheist, for who tithes their income these days? It seems to me that at best we are pale imitations of the *truly* worthy folk whom Jesus so remorselessly attacked. How he would have treated us I shudder to think.

7. *Jewish salvation history is seen to square with Jesus’ statements about the kingdom but, unfortunately, only in so far as it portrays his thinking as deranged.* Given the twentieth century’s long and involved controversy concerning the kingdom of God Sanders is aware of the need to make some sense of the subject by means of his Jewish salvation-history pattern. His own analysis convinces him (rightly I believe) that Jesus spoke about the kingdom as a concrete reality due to be established in this world and not as a spiritual affair in the world to come. He also, I believe, rightly maintains that Jesus normally spoke about the kingdom as something God would bring about in the future though he admits it is not impossible Jesus thought about it as being already present in some way in his own activity.<sup>1543</sup> Finally, he rightly emphasises that Jesus spoke about the kingdom as something people could enter but not as something they could actually bring about: God himself being the only one capable of performing this feat.<sup>1544</sup>

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<sup>1543</sup> ‘Jesus might have thought that the kingdom was somehow present in his own words and deeds: I cannot prove that he did not think this. I only note that no passage clearly says so.’ Sanders, *Figure* p. 177-8. ‘... [Jesus] thought that the power of God was especially manifest in his own ministry. He could conceivably have called this present power ‘the kingdom’. Sanders, *Figure* p. 182.

<sup>1544</sup> ‘Jesus thought that people should and could commit themselves to his way; they were not to be merely passive. But we must note what he urged. He said that by living right, people can *enter* the kingdom. According to the evidence, he thought that there was nothing that anyone could do to *bring* the kingdom, and even he himself could not assign places in it. It is drawing near, and people await it, but they cannot make it come. Like leaven, it grows on its own. In every single case it is God who does whatever has to be done, except that individuals who live right will enter the kingdom. There is no

Sanders fits this data into his salvation-history pattern to produce the following scenario:

- Jesus saw himself as the last messenger appointed by God to warn Israel that the kingdom was about to arrive.
- He envisaged this kingdom as a concrete reality which God himself would introduce.<sup>1545</sup>
- He believed the coming of the kingdom would involve a judgement of the Gentile nations and Israel's redemption and restoration.<sup>1546</sup>
- He believed that when the kingdom came he himself would reign as viceroy, his twelve disciples acting as judges.<sup>1547</sup>
- Unfortunately when Jesus forced the issue, by threatening the destruction of the Temple, the kingdom did not come.<sup>1548</sup>
- Jesus may have died disappointed.<sup>1549</sup>

In this instance I am happy with the fit between the Jewish salvation-history and the Gospel data concerning the kingdom. There are, however, a number of problems regarding Sanders' basic pattern which the kingdom issue brings to light. First it has to be admitted that the idea that God will supernaturally establish a kingdom in this world for his favourites is, in itself, extremely bizarre and I am aware of nothing like it in ancient literature. I can perfectly understand that people living in a centrarchal community, on finding themselves overrun by a foreign power and bereft of all means of saving themselves, might in desperation secretly hope that their god would intervene to do the business magically for them. I can even imagine resistance fighters within a overrun community using such a secret hope to get others to join them in opposing the

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evidence at all for the view that individuals can get together with others and *create* the kingdom by reforming social, religious and political institutions.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 179.

<sup>1545</sup> 'He did not want to give precise descriptions of the world to come, but he did not think that there would be nothing except incorporeal spirit. Instead, there would be a new and better age in which his disciples – and, it follows, he himself – would play the leading role.' Sanders *Figure* p. 187.

<sup>1546</sup> 'Jesus' hope for the kingdom fits into long-standing and deeply held hopes among the Jews, who continued to look for God to redeem his people and constitute a new kingdom, one in which Gentiles would serve the God of Israel.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 193.

<sup>1547</sup> 'He thought that in the new age God (or his viceroy) would reign supreme, without opposition.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 183.

<sup>1548</sup> 'Jesus' symbolic action of overthrowing tables in the Temple was understood in connection with a saying about destruction, ... the action and the saying, in the view of the authorities, constituted a prophetic threat. ... I think it highly probable that Jesus himself intended the action to predict the destruction of the Temple ... .' Sanders, *Figure* p. 260. 'If Jesus threatened the Temple, or predicted its destruction shortly after he overturned tables in its commercial area (which would amount to the same thing), he did not think that he and his small band could knock down the walls, so that not one stone was left on another. He thought that God would destroy it. As a good Jewish prophet, he could have thought that God would employ a foreign army for this destruction; but, as a radical first-century eschatologist, he probably thought that God would do it directly. ...' Sanders, *Figure* p. 261. 'After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers thought that within their lifetimes he would return to establish his kingdom. After his conversion, Paul was of the very same view. The Christians very soon, as early as I Thessalonians (c. 50 CE), had to start coping with the troublesome fact that the kingdom had not yet come. It is almost impossible to explain these historical facts on the assumption that Jesus himself did not expect the imminent end or transformation of the present world order. He thought that in the new age God (or his viceroy) would reign supreme, without opposition.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 183.

<sup>1549</sup> '... if Jesus expected God to change the world, he was wrong.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 179.

oppressor. However, I find it difficult to imagine people involved in such acts of resistance believing that they did not have to bother about anything, including what the enemy might do, because if they got into difficulties they could count on God to intervene and get them off the hook. That sounds to me deranged: a denial of political reality which would have been recognised as a madness by the ancients quite as much as it is by people today. Because of this I find it beyond belief that a person who apparently reminded his disciples about the reality of political engagement, by telling them a story of a king carefully calculating the risks before deciding to go to war, would have turned out to be such an unhinged fool himself. In saying this I do not pretend to know precisely what Jesus intended in telling the parable 'A King Going to War' on some forgotten occasion. I do know, however, that only a person who fully appreciated the realities of political engagement and understood the need to respect them would have told such a parable. This makes it, for me, out of the question that Jesus believed he could count on being miraculously saved if problems arose in carrying out God's work, as Sanders tries to make us believe. For a man is either aware of political reality and mentally equipped to deal with it or he isn't and if we put Sanders' pattern aside everything tends to suggest Jesus was both mentally sound and well aware of what, politically speaking, was the score.<sup>1550</sup>

But this is not all for there is another problem with Sanders' pattern which the kingdom issue highlights. The fact is that the pattern offers no explanation as to why Jesus suddenly came to the conclusion, wrongly as it turned out (so Sanders believes),<sup>1551</sup> that the big moment when God would bring in his kingdom was just about to arrive. Second Isaiah was convinced he was witnessing a decisive stage in God's plans, if not the actual coming of the kingdom itself, but that was because he identified Cyrus as the hand of Yahweh. It was the news that the Persian king had defeated Babylon which made Second Isaiah declare that Yahweh had forgiven his people and was about to offer them a second chance. I suppose Sanders could argue John the Baptist had persuaded Jesus that the decisive moment in history was just about to happen, but that simply puts the question back to John. How was *he* persuaded? Elsewhere Sanders appears to argue that first century Palestine was one of those odd situations in history when such weird beliefs spontaneously arose; but this does not constitute an explanation since, if Jesus and John were both basically deranged, then trying to understand them by coming up with a rational explanation is a pure waste of time. In short, looking for a rational explanation of what Jesus was about, as all of us are doing, is itself a recognition that an hypothesis involving madness has to be ruled out.

It seems to be the case that in using his 'Jewish salvation history' pattern to understand Jesus Sanders invariably portrays him as being, in one way or another, mentally unbalanced. This makes me wonder whether or not there is something amiss with the

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<sup>1550</sup> In saying this I am not simply relying on one parable which by the nature of the story told indicates Jesus was aware of the need to keep one's feet firmly on the ground. The fact is Jesus' reactive strategy as a whole, involving his parable approach in general and much else besides, depends entirely on a process of appealing to reality. This means that of all people Jesus cannot seriously be accused of indulging in make believe, as any unbiased reader of the Gospels must come to realise.

<sup>1551</sup> '... if Jesus expected God to change the world, he was wrong.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 179. 'It is almost impossible to explain these historical facts on the assumption that Jesus himself did not expect the imminent end or transformation of the present world order. He thought that in the new age God (or his viceroy) would reign supreme, without opposition.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 182-3.

pattern itself. The best way of examining it is to compare it with the normal centrarchical pattern as found, for example, in the Sargon texts.<sup>1552</sup> In this pattern the successful leader of a palace coup is adopted by the resident god who is said to defend him and make him and his dynasty successful until, for historical reasons, the dynasty fails; at this point the explanation given is that Sargon inadvertently angered a rival god who, in revenge, brought his dynasty down. What we have here is a pattern that enables people with a given conservative/dominion mindset to described reality from their own perspective using the language of myth. The thing that is important to understand is that in this scenario reality always commands, the myth being simply a tool for expressing a point of view about what was going on. In Sanders' 'Jewish salvation-history' we have something quite different. Here too we have a conservative/dominion pattern of adoption; only, instead of the pattern being seen as a tool for expressing a point of view about a given reality it becomes a mad way of trying to avoid the reality. It becomes, in fact, a dangerous bit of self-delusion. For Israel's reality was that she was not in a position to dominate except in a very small way and for very short periods of time. What Sander's hypothetical 'Jewish salvation-history' pattern provides in these sorry circumstances therefore is simply a way for Israel to keep believing *whatever the reality of her circumstance*. Sanders himself draws attention to this state of affairs without admitting, of course, that it constitutes a retreat from reality, and a vain attempt to find solace in myth.

We note that this theological plan is partly past and partly future. In the past, God called Abraham, and so forth; in the future, he will redeem his people and the Gentiles as well. Jews could explain their own history by seeing it in light of this ideology. If they suffered, they could explain that God was punishing them but would later restore them; if they flourished, God was fulfilling his promises; if they flourished a little but not much, God was giving them a foretaste of full redemption. Obviously these explanatory devices, which place events in a larger ideological construction, could be used to explain current events at any time. The theological scheme was there and could be exploited. If something dramatic happened, anyone could stand up and say, 'See here, this is part of God's grand design. It is time for our redemption.'<sup>1553</sup>

It was, of course, this crucial feature which led me to conclude in Chapter 1 that Sanders' 'Jewish salvation-history' pattern constitutes a dry belief-scheme and not a flesh and blood ideology. For you cannot deny that an ideology, whether you approve of it or not, is designed to enable people to face up to reality whereas what Sanders describes here, whatever your feelings may otherwise be about it, is something designed to enable people to hide from the truth of their situation.

This glaring defect in Sanders' pattern, which is clearly the source of all of this madness and disconnection with reality supposedly associated with Jesus, leads me to wonder about the pattern's origins. Sanders claims he gets it directly from the Hebrew Bible. However, I note that whereas the salvation-history pattern maintains that the kingdom lies in the future and that God alone will be the one to initiate it, most revisionist (i.e. conservative) texts in the Jewish Bible operate on the basis that the kingdom is manifest in the present order and as such constitutes a human construct.<sup>1554</sup>

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<sup>1552</sup> Sargon of Agade *ANET* p. 267 and The Sargon Chronicle *ANET* p. 266.

<sup>1553</sup> Sanders, *Figure* pp. 80-1.

<sup>1554</sup> See Hanson: '...the second major element which would have alienated the visionary group [is] the absence of an eschatological dimension in the Chronicler's history. The affirmation of existing structures as 'absolute and eternal' implies a strong negation of the eschatological element of classical prophecy,

The book of Ezekiel is an exception to this rule of course. It seems to have been offered as a sort of blueprint to be used by the exiles in establishing the kingdom on their return. However, as such it shares the characteristic of other conservative texts in seeing the kingdom as an order which the faithful human community is perfectly capable of establishing without supernatural aid. This, however, is something Sanders' Jewish salvation-history pattern specifically excludes. For in it the clear understanding is that Israel, as a minor military power, is incapable of achieving salvation unaided, an inescapable fact which supposedly drives the community to abandon political reality and retreat into a weird belief that some day in the future Israel's God will intervene and save her himself.

Though there is clearly something badly wrong (not to say insane) with Sanders' Jewish salvation-history pattern I believe he is basically right in claiming it comes from the Bible in the sense that all of its constituent parts hail from there. What we found in third Isaiah was a 'revolutionary' prophetic group insisting that their priestly hierocratic opponents were out of order in trying to build the kingdom themselves since that was something only Yahweh could do. In laying this charge the prophetic group insisted that only when the Gentiles offered to rebuild the Temple would it be evident that Yahweh was vindicating Israel's demonstration exercise and bringing in the kingdom. What we see here in the post exilic texts, therefore, are two perfectly sane,<sup>1555</sup> though ideologically incompatible traditions:

- 1) An old 'revolutionary' tradition based on a marginal ideology of radical solidarity accompanied by a strategy of shaming through demonstration in which God's function (which he alone can carry out) is to vindicate the shaming exercise in the teeth of civilisation's profound scepticism.
- 2) A new, revisionist tradition based on a conservative ideology of dominance, accompanied by a 'building the kingdom' strategy in which God's function – apart from offering the blueprint – is to show approval by making the community endure, or disapproval by bringing upon it misfortune.

Given these two biblical traditions it now becomes clear that *what we see in Sanders' Jewish salvation-history is an artificial hybrid formed by cleverly welding the old 'revolutionary' strategy onto the new conservative ideology*. In forming a new unity, which gives every appearance of being traditional while in fact being nothing of the kind, this formula constitutes a clever though devious piece of work. However, as we have seen, it results in a pattern which is fundamentally weird and which taints with madness everything it touches. This, as I have said, is not an accusation that can be levelled against either of the post-exilic traditions since both of them, though ideologically opposed, attempted to address political reality. So what are the origins of this 'Jewish salvation-history' pattern? Sanders claims it was a thinking bedded in Jewish apocalyptic – a thought-form he believes Jesus shared. However, we have shown that this is not a sustainable thesis since apocalyptic is nothing more, at bottom, than a linguistic technique in which a person expresses his or her thoughts about the world in dreams and visions. That is not to suggest that apocalyptic thinkers were somehow immune from religious madness. All it means is that detachment from

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.for the element calls for judgement on the status quo, and for the supplanting of the old structures by a new order.' *Dawn*, p. 276.

<sup>1555</sup> Sane in the sense of being completely rational and in touch with reality.

political reality is something that has to be proved in every case rather than being assumed simply because a writer used apocalyptic language.<sup>1556</sup> Though I find no good reason to believe that Jesus' was in any way afflicted by this disease that is not to say that others of his day were not. Christopher Rowland described the general political scene pertaining in Jesus' day like this:

We have noted what a strong thrust there was towards a pragmatic attitude, both with regard to the maintenance of Roman power and the practical outworking of the faith, granted the continued political and social constraints of the time. The responses of various groups were different, but the majority felt that in practice the biblical idealism had to take second place to a more limited fulfilment of the religious observances within the constraints of a society under foreign domination. But Jews could not escape the reality of their eschatological idealism. We find that the fantasies of the future hope continued to make their appearance. The cosmic concerns of the religion were never allowed to die, despite the factors which compelled some to lay stress on the need for a present, inadequate response. These visions of hope functioned in four ways. First, they demonstrated the way in which the Jewish imagination continually brought to the surface the centrality of that future hope. Secondly, for some they acted as an inspiration to take action in the direction of achieving that utopia which was set out in the visions. Thirdly, they expressed frustration with the socio-economic situation and a longing for divine vengeance and the righting of all wrongs. Fourthly, they offered some an escape from reality, a fantasy of what things might be like and a compensation for the inadequacies of the present, not only for the apocalyptic seer but also for his readers. The reality of the divine world of perfection is established in the visions. A divine dimension to human existence is demonstrated to the readers in the visions of heaven. While it may have had the effect of strengthening adherence to existing religious traditions, that flight into the visionary world often restored support for the status quo by suggesting that while there would be a time of perfection in the future the powers that be (Rom. 13. 1) must meanwhile be obeyed as they had been ordained according to God's ordering of the times and seasons.<sup>1557</sup>

I note here that Rowland writes of the existence of at least one section of the community which was both apocalyptic and guilty of political fantasising and that he identifies this group as being status quo or conservative in nature. The fact that Sanders is prepared to make use of this conservative phenomenon of Jewish salvation history in understanding Jesus' thinking, even though it tends to portray the latter as a weirdo – a matter he tries his best to skate over – suggests he at least sees something in it, but what can this be? *The advantage for Sanders in Jewish salvation-history is, of course, that it makes a conservative reading of the Gospels apparently feasible*, something which would not normally be the case given that Jesus clearly believed only God could bring in the kingdom. Indeed, without such a pattern Sanders would not even be able to make a case for a conservative understanding of the Gospels at all, For conservative theology is founded on the premise that humans are the ones who actually build the kingdom, under God's direction. However, by combining this conservative ideology with the 'revolutionary' strategy in which God is seen as the only one capable of building the kingdom – a strategy quite undeniably present in both testaments – the appearance is given of a new conservative reading which, at least in this crucial domain, accords with the Gospel texts!

If Sanders only manages to square his findings about the kingdom with Jewish salvation history by seeing Jesus as somewhat unbalanced how does our own

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<sup>1556</sup> See above p. 455.

<sup>1557</sup> Rowland, *Christian Origins*, (London: SPCK, 1985) pp. 103-4.

alternative pattern fare? Given the basic terms of the 'revolution' pattern it would have been perfectly clear to anyone employing it that the kingdom of God was a concrete reality which could only truly be said to have arrived in any given situation when everyone came to acknowledge the undreamed of advantages accruing for communities which followed the dictates of radical solidarity. This would, of course, explain Sanders' findings that Jesus normally spoke about the kingdom as a concrete reality due to be established in this world at some future date. That said, while this situation was materialising as a result of some human demonstration of radical solidarity, the Kingdom could still properly be said to be actually present in the world in a very concrete if partial way, there where the power of God was seen to be bringing about a 'softening' of human hearts. So someone using the 'revolution' pattern would have found it perfectly appropriate had Jesus thought that the kingdom was in some way already present in his own work. It would seem therefore that the 'revolution' pattern also fits perfectly with Sanders' findings, with the rather important additional advantage that it portrays Jesus as a man in his right mind.

*R. W. Funk and M. J. Borg and a Liberal Reading of the Gospels*

We now turn our attention to two liberal readings of the Gospels. But first let us remind ourselves of the advantages and disadvantages which liberal biblical historians face when writing their books. In presenting the Bible as a work which advocates equality, freedom and openness, as over against the all too numerous arbitrary inequalities and restrictions which unelected conservative hierarchs impose on a community to keep it in order and in its place, liberals have the great advantage of knowing they have a product which will naturally sell itself to a large number of people nowadays and especially to those on their way up.<sup>1558</sup> For, as Sanders has well shown, though conservatives are able, to a degree, to produce a refined model, which at least in the past succeeded in motivating hierarchs and peasants alike to do their bit in creating a well ordered society, it is difficult if not impossible to imbue such dry authoritarianism with a motivating vitality that modern democrats will find attractive. However, conversely, the great disadvantage for liberal biblical historians is that they can never openly suggest that their liberating bourgeois ideas are actually to be found in the Biblical texts. For whereas conservatives can easily show that their feudalistic notions were around at the time – at least in a very similar centrarchal form – liberals can produce no evidence to show that a bourgeois class existed in the ancient world capable of producing ideas which reflect those which they and their kind have come to create in defence of their common interests in modern times. We will constantly have to keep

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<sup>1558</sup> See, for example, Funk's recognition of the fact that his liberal reading of the Gospels is only for hardy folk: 'To find oneself suddenly free in a dizzying realm without a polestar can be truly exhilarating, unbelievably liberating, but it can also produce sheer terror. For those hardy enough to brave the unknown, it is the opportunity to discover what it is like to chart a new course, to sail to the edge of the world, to put down boundary stakes on a vast, undifferentiated prairie, to erect a shelter from the endless reaches of the cold, boundless heavens overhead. For the less hardy pioneers of the spirit, a genuine quest may result in unanticipated trauma. The loss of received notions of the Bible regularly produces an emotionally devastating experience. I do not wish to rob those vulnerable souls of their mythic shelters if they cannot weather that loss. For those who fear that result, the end of this paragraph is a good place to exit the adventure that lies before us.' Funk, *Honest* p. 22.

this situation in mind when tracking Robert Funk's and Marcus Borg's attempts to establish portraits of the historical Jesus.

*Jesus as basically enigmatic according to Funk*

How does Funk describe the historical Jesus? His first brush stroke is to qualify the Jesus of the gospel records as an enigma, immediately making it clear that this is a complex phenomenon existing on three different levels.<sup>1559</sup>

- First, the Jesus of the Gospels is an enigma because 'he belonged to another time and place'.
- Second, he is enigmatic, proving to be an enigma even in his own day, 'because he belonged to another time and place even for his contemporaries; by virtue of his vision he did not belong to their everyday world either'.
- Third, he is also enigmatic because like other historical personages (e.g. Abraham Lincoln and Socrates) 'he floats .. in the collective imagination as an elusive but endlessly tantalising figure'.

Now as regards such crucial issues I am a pedant. I need to know *exactly* what people are saying. I have no problem with the idea that, like anyone from the past, Jesus is to a degree enigmatic at least on the first or *historical* level. And I have no problem with the idea that there is an added difficulty on the third or *cultural* level because – like Lincoln and Socrates – Jesus is iconically important making it difficult to distinguish the person from the icon. My problem is with what is being maintained on the second and what I take as being the *ideological* level. It seems to me what Funk is saying here is that Jesus was an enigma to the people of his own day (and hence also to us) *because he did not espouse the worldview everyone else worked with but instead chose an alternative, subversive ideology of his own.*

*Jesus' worldview is alternative but not clearly ideological*

However, Funk does not make this clear because he does not mention the word ideology, speaking instead, vaguely, about 'a vision that subverts'.<sup>1560</sup> In my own mind I am clear that such visions are ideological so why does Funk not come clean like Sanders and admit that he sees Jesus as advocating a specific ideology – though obviously a different ideology from the one Sanders identified?

*Jesus' world view as liberal but Funk cannot say it*

Because Funk never speaks of ideologies we are unable to give a straight answer to this question, being reduced in the end to conjecture. Of course, had he admitted that this vision thing in Jesus was an alternative ideology Funk would have been obliged to concede that it came from some historical social development because that is how all ideologies arise, as rationalisations of group interests. From my point of view this is no problem since I see Jesus as defending the god of the marginals ideology created by his

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<sup>1559</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 18.

<sup>1560</sup> 'We should not be surprised to learn that the Jesus no one knows is a subverter of causes.' Funk, *Honest* p. 18.



Hebrew ancestors. However, as we will shortly see, Funk seeks to see Jesus in a liberal light. This means that if he gets trapped into talking about Jesus' vision in ideological terms he will find himself having to explain how Jesus came to advocate ideas which only first saw the light of day in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of revolutionary changes in European society. This is a predicament any sensible person would try to avoid. My conjecture therefore is this: if Funk rejects all ideology talk and insists on speaking about personal visions it is because that is the only way he can avoid such awkward questions. There is, however, a price to be paid for such a tactic. For if Funk presents Jesus as someone who, through individual genius, somehow managed to apprehend ideas centuries before their allotted time, it stands to reason that none of his contemporaries would have been able to understand him. As we have seen, Funk attempts to deal with this problem by turning it into a virtue, portraying Jesus as one who was an enigma to the people of his own day. However, this too has its problems for the fact is that there is no real evidence in the texts to suggest people found Jesus enigmatic.<sup>1561</sup> Indeed the texts indicate that his fellow countrymen understood him pretty well and if some of them eventually decided it was necessary to get rid of him it was not because they found him frustratingly hard to pin down – a ridiculous idea to say the least – but because they realised only too well where he was coming from. That said, I can certainly see both that this enigma stuff is most convenient for Funk and also why he seeks to peddle it. For it means that he does not have to answer any of the awkward questions about the provenance of the liberal ideas he wishes to attribute to Jesus.

But let us get back to Funk's elucidation of the personal 'subversive' vision which he pretends seized this first-century peasant genius. This is how he continues:

I am intrigued by the provocative but shadowy figure that one occasionally catches sight of in the ancient gospel texts. In his authentic parables and aphorisms, Jesus provides a glimpse into another reality, one that lies beyond present conceptual horizons. His words and deeds open onto that reality. His vision, in my view, is worth exploring.<sup>1562</sup>

What Funk is referring to here is his own 'New Hermeneutic' interpretation of the parables, in which Jesus is supposed to have invented stories which hearers could then use as vehicles to discover the new visionary reality he wished to introduce them to. Funk himself admits that such a story-telling art was completely unheard of in Jesus' own day and that it was apparently necessary to wait until the twentieth century to find other writers capable of employing it:

The parables ... came to be understood as a speech-form characteristic of Jesus. ... it was a form Jesus had not borrowed from his predecessors and a form not easily replicated. Very few sages have achieved the same level of creativity with this particular genre of discourse. Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges are among the few who have mastered the form.<sup>1563</sup>

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<sup>1561</sup> The parables are often taken as being enigmatic but that is only because they are stories which became separated from the contexts they were meant to illustrate. It is also sometimes suggested that Jesus was deliberately enigmatic in refusing to give straightforward answers to questions put to him, but this was only because the questions were designed to trick him. It is also true that John describes people as being confused by Jesus' metaphorical language. But that is surely just a literary device used by John to underline the fact that the words he puts into Jesus' mouth should not be taken literally.

<sup>1562</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 18-19.

<sup>1563</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 68

It is not my intention to examine the stories of Kafka and Borges to try and work out precisely the source of their common art-form – insofar as it can be said that they shared one. However, I suggest that the liberal ideology of the enlightenment would naturally be the first place to look, though other minor influences would naturally have played their part. Such an examination would not be of any interest to Funk, of course, since he seeks to persuade us that the art-form he is talking about was invented by Jesus 'way before liberal ideas ever hit the world in any shape or form. Were this true we can be sure no one would have had the least idea what Jesus was talking about in first-century Palestine, for Borges himself draws attention to the fact that his was not an-art form designed to initiate people into a totally new vision of reality but rather a way in which people *having a similar viewpoint* could share their experiences:

I do not write for a select minority, which means nothing to me, nor for that adulated platonic entity known as 'The Masses'. Both abstractions, so dear to the demagogue, I disbelieve in. I write for myself and for my friends, and I write to ease the passing of time.<sup>1564</sup>

*Jesus' ideology as challenging and open-ended – typical liberal characteristics.*

But am I rightly persuaded Funk sees Jesus as an advocate of our modern liberal ideals of freedom from political restrictions and an openness to competition and discovery? Although he never deigns to use ugly words like liberal or conservative there is little room for doubt about what he is suggesting:

The Jesus of that alternative world encourages me to celebrate life, to suck the marrow out of existence, to explore, and probe, and experiment, to venture into uncharted seas, without fear of a tyrannical and vindictive God. He does not set limits on my curiosity, on my drive to challenge every axiom. That same Jesus prompts me to give myself to tasks that exceed, even contradict, my own self-interest. I am not infrequently startled at the tasks I find myself willing to undertake.<sup>1565</sup>

It would be hard to find a clearer exposition of liberal ideals – unheard of in the Bible - a situation which Funk then proceeds to personalise by picturing himself not as the conservative knight in shining armour seeking to protect damsels in distress but rather as the liberal hero who would free his fellow citizens from their feudal bondage:

As I look around me, I am distressed by those who are enslaved by a Christ imposed on them by a narrow and rigid legacy. There are thousands, perhaps millions, of Americans who are the victims of a mythical Jesus conjured up by modern evangelists to whip their followers into a frenzy of guilt and remorse – and cash contributions. I agonize over their slavery in contrast to my freedom. I have a residual hankering to free my fellow human beings from that bondage, which can be as abusive as any form of slavery known to humankind. I believe that such a hankering is inspired by Jesus himself, who seems to be untouched by religious bigotry and tyranny and unacquainted with the straitjacket of literalism and dogmatism.<sup>1566</sup>

For obvious reasons Funk does not show his hand but can there be any doubt that he seeks to portray the historical Jesus as the epitome of modern liberal ideals and values thus making him out to be a genius capable of intuitively foreseeing and advocated notions centuries before their time.

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<sup>1564</sup> Borges, *The Book of Sand*. Introduction.

<sup>1565</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 19.

<sup>1566</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 19.

*To make his liberal case Funk has to go behind the evangelists' backs*

In the guise of an advocate of radical freedom and enterprise Funk portrays the historical Jesus as subverting layer upon layer of false ideas, starting off with the products of modern scholarship which Schweitzer himself had famously criticised:

To this list of things at which to take aim Schweitzer might have added others: It is also a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the Christ of Christian orthodoxy, the Christ of the creeds. The creedal Christ, no less than the best scholarly reconstructions of Jesus, is an idol that invites shattering. Both must "yield to the facts, which ... are sometimes the most radical critics of all," as Schweitzer put it. Finally, it has become clear that even the Christ of the gospels is a further impediment to any serious effort to rediscover Jesus of Nazareth. It is the gospel of *Jesus* and his acts that we seek to identify and isolate amid the rich variety of early Christian reminiscences and affirmations preserved by all the surviving gospels.<sup>1567</sup>

In thus attacking the Gospel writers' main plank – their joint confession of faith that Jesus had been vindicated by God as his anointed – Funk shows the liberal's characteristic contempt for the biblical tradition itself by flagging up his intention of going behind the back of the evangelists in order to try and discover the true historical Jesus. This is not, of course, something which I as a marginal-ideology disciple can easily countenance. For though the evangelists were clearly capable of getting things wrong, perhaps badly so sometimes, and certainly nothing they said was so sacred that it should not be put to the test – both in the light of history and in the God of the marginals' rather more searing light – we must have confidence that on the central issue concerning Jesus' ideological convictions they were right about what they witnessed, otherwise we might as well forget it. For the chances of establishing Jesus' ideological convictions *against their joint evidence* is zero. Put it like this. It is certainly possible – even if extremely unlikely – that the evangelists were all hugely mistaken about Jesus. However, were this the case we would stand little chance of unveiling their perfidy and we would have less than a cat's chance in hell of doing anything more than guess at the real truth, one guess being as good as another – the tabloids' delight. So if the evangelist were indeed wrong on this score, as Funk suggests – for what seems to me fairly pitiful reasons – then we should all go home and think of something better to do with our lives than try to uncover the historical Jesus.

*Doubt used to guarantee the liberal cause*

Funk, however, clearly relishes the dubiousness of the situation for he emphasises both the tentative nature of this attempt to discover the historical Jesus behind the evangelists' back and the real possibility that the results might be so meagre as to make it impossible to come up with a proper ideological sketch of the historical Jesus:

But this venture will not result in a final, fixed, immutable destination. The picture of Jesus that emerges will be tentative, subject to new information. If we cannot arrive at a final profile, what then is our goal? If we cannot reach the original, the real Jesus, the true Christianity, what is the purpose of the quest? The answer is worth repeating: The aim of the quest of the historical Jesus is to set Jesus free, to liberate him from prevailing captivities. Truth is a moving target. It is always necessary to remind ourselves that the liberated Jesus will eventually be imprisoned again and reentombed. Then it will be time to start all over again.<sup>1568</sup>

As usual at such crucial points it is not easy to be absolutely certain what Funk is actually saying. He seems to descend purposefully into metaphorical language ('truth is

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<sup>1567</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 20.

<sup>1568</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 20 - 21.

a moving target') simply in order to make it impossible for anyone to pin him down. If the historical Jesus cannot finally be established behind the backs of the evangelists, as Funk leaves open as a real possibility (as well he might!), what does it mean for him to say that the quest of the historical Jesus can still be fulfilled simply by setting Jesus free? How can you set someone free when you do not even know who they are? I can only suppose Funk means that we should all agree that our portraits of the historical Jesus are fundamentally falsifying. That way the liberals will have won against the odds since as they see it Jesus stands for limitless freedom, openness and continual competition and striving. What is more they will have won not by having the most adequate portrait since, as we have seen, unlike the conservative Jesus their Jesus is without an historical leg to stand on. They will have won, therefore, simply as a result of their incredible gall and by virtue of the fact that theirs happens to be the ideology actually in place ... for the moment.

### *Criticism*

Understandably, I am not ready to give Funk what he wants since, from my point of view, it is perfectly feasible to extract from the Gospels an intelligible and unfalsifying ideological portrait of the historical Jesus without going behind the evangelists' backs. This is unsurprising since such a portrait was precisely what the evangelists set out in the first place to achieve – though you could have been forgiven had you missed this obvious point when reading Funk's book. Of course, understanding the portrait the evangelists have carefully bequeathed to us will not be achieved by distrusting these original chroniclers, as Funk chooses to do, but rather by attempting to understand what they were trying to put across using language we may well find difficult to stomach.

### *Jesus' worldview as spiritual according to Borg*

Whereas Funk presents the historical Jesus as the embodiment of an energetic force which undermines every restrictive practice making for inequality and challenges everyone to join in living life to the full, open to every experience and adventure, Borg presents a gentler and more compassionate, though equally liberal figure:

My own sketch of the pre-Easter Jesus ... is based upon a typology of religious figures. My research and evaluation of the best Jesus scholarship convince me that Jesus had characteristics of several different types of religious personalities, and each stroke in my sketch identifies him with one of these types.

1. The historical Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God.
2. Jesus was a *teacher of wisdom* who regularly used the classic forms of wisdom speech (parables, and memorable short sayings known as aphorisms) to teach a subversive and alternative wisdom.
3. Jesus was a *social prophet*, similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. As such, he criticized the elites (economic, political, and religious) of his time, was an advocate of an alternative social vision, and was often in conflict with authorities.
4. Jesus was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church.<sup>1569</sup>

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<sup>1569</sup> Borg, *Meeting*, pp. 29-30.

In basing his sketch of the historical Jesus on an analytical procedure (a typology of religious figures) which ignores ideological considerations Borg shows that he is just as unwilling as Funk to admit that Jesus' convictions were ideological.<sup>1570</sup> Biblicists who write as defenders of the ideas of the ruling class habitually downplay ideology because it serves their purposes to pretend that theirs is not *the narrow perspective of those in power* but rather *the natural way of seeing things*. Conservatives who wrote at a time when their ideology was dominant tended to offer a discourse which admitted no alternative, people who refused to conform being simply painted as wicked. Funk and Borg, who write as advocates of the ideas of the new liberal ruling elite, are not in a position to do this, for obvious reasons. They are obliged to present their perspective as the alternative to the conservative vision recently brought to heel if not yet actually overthrown. That said, as defenders of the new ideology in place they nonetheless present their vision as the natural way of seeing things *once you start looking at the real world which formerly lay hidden beneath the cover of restrictions which the conservative establishment arbitrarily imposed*. For Sanders, as a defender of the conservative ideology now in retreat, it has suddenly become advantageous to admit that his perspective on the Bible is ideological since he knows he can prove the existence of conservative ideas in many biblical texts whereas liberals can never hope to do the same thing as regards their ideology.<sup>1571</sup> He knows the only hope of his liberal opponents is to somehow make out that Jesus' vision was not ideological. So it suits him now to play the ideological card – even though his conservative predecessors refrained from doing so when they held power. As for myself, I find no difficulty in admitting what is obvious: that all visions within the Bible, including the Gospels, are ideological. For as I see it the marginal (or god of the marginals) vision is clearly apparent in every biblical text, including the revisionist ones when these are viewed as backtrackings.

*Jesus' ideas alternative to and subversive of conservative conventional wisdom*

When it comes to characterising the political colour of Jesus' own wisdom (the vision he expressed) the two ideas Borg uses are, once again, 'alternative' and 'subversive'. This is a strong indication that he too, like Funk, sees Jesus as an exponent of liberal ideas and values. This is amply confirmed when Borg describes the wisdom Jesus opposed, which he labels 'conventional wisdom'. For as soon as he starts unpacking this concept we see it as conservative ideology under a new name.

Conventional wisdom is the dominant consciousness of any culture. It is a culture's most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are (its worldview, or image of reality) and about the way to live (its ethos, or way of life). It is 'what everybody knows' – the world that everybody is socialized into through the process of growing up. ... First, conventional wisdom provides guidance about how to live. ... Second, conventional wisdom is intrinsically based upon the dynamic of rewards and punishments. ... Third, conventional wisdom has both social and psychological consequences. Socially, it creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries. ...

<sup>1570</sup> For a very similar exercise see Hanson's analysis of the post exilic texts, using the religious criteria of eschatology pp. 422-423 above.

<sup>1571</sup> Since liberals, as defenders of the ideology in place, have renounced their revolutionary past and replaced it with an unremitting reforming zeal, the best way to attack them is to point out that the Gospel texts show no evidence that Jesus was in the business of reforming society, which is exactly what Sanders does.

Psychologically, conventional wisdom becomes the basis for identity and self-esteem. ... It is the internal cop and the internal judge. ... [C]onventional wisdom creates a world in which we live. ... Life in this world can be and often is grim. It is a life of bondage to the dominant culture, in which we become automatic cultural persons, responding automatically to the dictates of culture. It is a life of limited vision and blindness, in which we see what our culture conditions us to see and pay attention to what our culture says is worth paying attention to. It is a world of judgment: I judge myself and others by how well I and they measure up. ... There is an image of God that goes with the world of conventional wisdom. When conventional wisdom appears in religious form, God is imaged primarily as lawgiver and judge. God may be spoken of in other ways as well (for example, as forgiving and gracious), but the bottom line is that God is seen as both the source and enforcer, and therefore the legitimator, of the religious form of conventional wisdom. God becomes the one whom we must satisfy, the one whose requirements must be met.<sup>1572</sup>

Borg sees this conventional wisdom as most clearly expressed in the purity system or culture of holiness in first century Palestine.

[T]he effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. ... At the centre of the purity system were the temple and the priesthood. The temple was the geographic and cultic centre of Israel's purity map. ... [T]he temple was also the centre of the ruling elites among the Jewish people. Not only were the high priestly families the religious elite, but they overlapped the economic and political elites, being linked with them by frequent intermarriage and other associations. Thus the politics of purity was to some extent the ideology of the dominant elites – religious, political, and economic. ... Purity was also central to two Jewish renewal groups in first century Palestine. The Pharisees sought the extension of the more stringent priestly rules of purity into everyday life; and the Essenes ... withdrew to the desert wilderness .. believing that purity could be attained only in isolation from the impure world of culture. ... [So] we can say that both 'Temple Judaism' and the leading renewal movements were committed to the paradigm of purity. It was both a hermeneutic and social system: it formed the lens through which they saw sacred tradition and provided a map for ordering their world.<sup>1573</sup>

### *Jesus' alternative worldview characterised by compassion*

Borg sees Jesus as attacking this purity system and replacing it with an alternative system of compassion:

In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion. The challenge is signalled at the outset by the *imitatio dei* of which Jesus speaks. It is striking that "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" so closely echoes "Be holy as God is holy," even as it makes a radical substitution. The close parallel suggests that Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with compassion. Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors that God.<sup>1574</sup>

But where does this idea of compassion come from? As we have seen, in the first stroke of his sketch mentioned above Borg characterises Jesus as a spirit person and it is from this spirit aspect of his character that Borg sees Jesus' concern with compassion arising:

Jesus was a person of Spirit and a person of compassion, and the two are related. ... Spirit is compassionate ... . But what led Jesus to speak of God as compassionate? How did he become so convinced of this and so passionate about it? The most persuasive answer locates that

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<sup>1572</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 75-78.

<sup>1573</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 52-53.

<sup>1574</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 53-54.

conviction in Jesus' own experience of God. It is implausible to see his perception of God as compassionate and the passionate courage with which he held to it as simply a result of the intellectual activity of studying the tradition, or to assume that based on some other grounds he decided it was a good idea. Rather, it is reasonable to surmise that he spoke of God as compassionate – as 'like a womb' – because of his own experience of the Spirit.<sup>1575</sup>

*Compassion as a motivational force enabling disciples to embark on a life of freedom painted in characteristic liberal colours*

But what exactly is the role of this compassion? Borg sees discipleship as involving a journey towards life in the spirit which involves a rejection of conservative aids and restrictions and an embracing of openness, freedom and challenge; compassion being the fruit of the spirit which makes this dynamic possible:

As a journeying with Jesus, discipleship means being on the road with him. It means to be an itinerant, a sojourner; to have nowhere to lay one's head, no permanent resting place. It means undertaking the journey from the life of conventional wisdom, from life in our Egypt and life in our Babylon, to the alternative wisdom of life in the Spirit. ... Discipleship means eating at his table and experiencing his banquet. ... It means being nourished by him and fed by him. ... If we think of the eucharist as like those meals in the wilderness, it becomes a powerful symbol of journeying with Jesus and being fed by him on that journey. "Take, eat, lest the journey be too great for you."<sup>1576</sup>

Reviewing this scenario it is easy to see how closely it reflects the pattern Funk presented. In both ideological considerations are carefully eschewed, Jesus' ideas being attributed to individual genius rather than to the particular interests of some historical social group.<sup>1577</sup> In both patterns Jesus' ideas are seen as pitted against the restrictive conservative ideas in place in first century Palestine and consequently they are characterised as 'alternative' and 'subversive'. Again, in both patterns Jesus' ideas are viewed as encouraging disciples to compete in life by living freely and openly in defiance of all social restrictions, the only possible difference being that, whereas Funk advocates a robust and manly competitive regime which he frankly admits may be beyond some people, Borg's Jesus provides a motherly and womblike environment for a discipleship which is designed to finally produce adult Christians capable of experiencing life in the raw, with all its possibilities. Here, finally, we have an avowal of undisguised liberal values.

I take it, therefore, as demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Borg aims to provide a reading of the Gospels that is substantially similar to that of Funk even though he is no more prepared to admit the implications of what he is doing, in reading modern ideas back into ancient texts, than Funk was. There is an interesting difference, however, for whereas Funk rather wisely refrained from opening up the can of worms at the true root of these liberal ideas, Borg shows no such discretion. Notwithstanding his own judgement that the biblical tradition is full of spirit people who advocated a

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<sup>1575</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 60-1.

<sup>1576</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 135.

<sup>1577</sup> 'He was a spirit person in the charismatic stream of Judaism, a God-intoxicated Jew, a Jewish mystic and healer. He was one of those people William James referred to as 'religious geniuses', persons whose perceptions of God and life are based on firsthand religious experience rather than the secondhand religion of received tradition and belief.' Borg, *Jesus in contemporary scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994) p. 152.

God of womblike compassion, he openly argues that Jesus got his understanding of compassion not from this tradition but simply from his own experience of a spiritual relationship with God! Indeed he makes a great deal of this conviction, arguing that history is full of spirit people from different cultures who shared the experience of such a relationship with God, Jesus simply being one of many:

Imaging Jesus as a particular instance of a type of religious personality known cross-culturally undermines a widespread Christian belief that Jesus is unique, which most commonly is linked to the notion that Christianity is exclusively true and that Jesus is "the only way." The image I have sketched views Jesus differently: rather than being the exclusive revelation of God, he is one of many mediators of the sacred. Yet even as this view subtracts from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian tradition, it also in my judgment adds to the credibility of both. To speak personally, when the truth of the Christian tradition was tied to the claim that the revelation of God was found only in this tradition (and in the antecedent Jewish tradition), there came a time when its truth became for me highly unlikely. What are the chances that God would speak only to and through this particular group of people (who just happened to be *our* group of people)? Indeed, I can put it more strongly: it became impossible for me to believe this. However, I find the image of Jesus as a spirit person highly credible. There really are people like this – and Jesus was one of them. There really are experiences of the sacred, of the numinous, of God – and Jesus was one for whom God was an experiential reality.<sup>1578</sup>

### *Criticism*

However, even Borg is obliged to admit that this argument, based as it is not only on a typological analysis of a somewhat arbitrary selection of so-called spirit people from the past but also on what Borg as a spirit person himself happens to find credible, will not prove acceptable to scientific historians.<sup>1579</sup> Using the work of Huston Smith he argues that 'the modern world-view' of scientific historians 'sees only two dimensions of what is in fact a "three-dimensional cross," only a world of space and time and not a world of spirit.'<sup>1580</sup> However, even if Borg were able in some way to convince us of the reality of this spirit world *he would still have his work cut out to persuade us that its essential quality was compassion*. For, as I see it, most of those in the ancient world whom Borg would call 'spirit people' demonstrated manipulative characteristics which I associate with a conservative, dominion ideology. There are a few exceptions, of course, high amongst them being some of the spirit people Borg finds in the biblical tradition itself.

Judaism had its stream of spirit persons. Indeed, they are the central figures in the biblical tradition, going back to the beginnings of Israel. Abraham and Jacob had visions of God and other paranormal experiences. Moses was a spirit person par excellence. ... He 'knew God face to face;' as his brief obituary at the end of the book of Deuteronomy puts it. Beyond Moses there is Elijah, a social prophet who was experientially in touch with the Spirit of God. He even, according to the stories about him, 'journeyed in the Spirit,' much as the Sioux spirit person Black Elk is reported to have done. Then there are the prophets of ancient Israel. For most of them the story of their 'call' is told, typically involving a visionary experience of another reality. Classic among these is the story of Ezekiel.<sup>1581</sup>

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<sup>1578</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 37.

<sup>1579</sup> It seem to me that Borg produces here the kind of argument which causes scientific historians to demand that Christians should refrain from engaging in historical debate if they find it impossible to control their flights of religious fantasy.

<sup>1580</sup> Borg, *Scholarship* p. 130. Quoting Huston Smith *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) in which the "three-dimensional cross" is the title and central image of the second chapter.

<sup>1581</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 34.



The question is, would it be right to use the ‘liberal’ characteristic of womblike encouragement and gentle fostering to qualify all, or indeed any, of these so-called ‘spirit people’, including Jesus himself? The short answer is No. One of them, Ezekiel, was clearly a revisionist who advocated what I call a conservative ideology and what Borg calls conventional wisdom, incorporating a fully fledged purity code. The others were equally clearly ‘revolutionaries’, there being not a single liberal amongst them, for all too obvious reasons. What is more, when you look carefully at Jesus’ words about ‘compassion’ in Luke 6. 36, upon which Borg builds his whole case, you begin to realise that they have nothing to do with the idea of nurturing or fostering (so as to prepare disciples to compete in life’s free-for-all, once conservative restrictive practices have been removed). What these words present us with, in fact, is the key ‘revolutionary’ value of radical solidarity without which the marginal finds him or herself lost beyond hope, their sense being ‘Demonstrate radical solidarity even as your Father demonstrates radical solidarity’. Indeed, as the very next verse (37) highlights,<sup>1582</sup> what these words mean is that disciples should be compassionate (meaning merciful) by refraining from judging others so as to avoid being condemned for marginalizing them by the god of the marginals himself. However, apparently Borg sees none of this. Had he been able to do so he might not have been so quick to dismiss the uniqueness of the Bible. He anguishes<sup>1583</sup> over it, asking how it is possible to believe that God speaks exclusively to a group of people which just happens to include himself? His problem is understandable but only if the Bible is viewed as a religious text, which, as I see it, isn’t the case. As an ideological ‘revolutionary’ text that defends the perspective and interests of marginals (which it most certainly is, whatever other, secondary, religious interests it may have) the Bible is, as far as I am aware, quite unique and if any historian knows of another text which advocates the position of the marginal as over against civilisation I will be interested to know about it.

*Funk’s and Borg’s analysis used to justify our own ‘revolutionary’ portrait of Jesus*  
 I would like to make it clear that in rejecting Borg’s and Funk’s liberal readings of the Gospels I do not thereby reject every facet of their analysis. Indeed I accept without demur their contention that Jesus’ vision was both alternative to and subversive of the conservative wisdom in place. My objection only concerns their conclusions as to the actual nature of this alternative, subversive vision. Without for obvious reasons openly avowing it, Borg and Funk imply that Jesus had the same perspective on the world as the one they share as a result of belonging to the new, post-enlightenment, liberal elite. I find this not just plain silly but also at variance with the texts which contain no inkling of liberal ideas in any shape or form. What the texts do contain, however, are ‘revolutionary’ ideas, including that of radical solidarity which is what Jesus was talking about when he said ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful’.

Given their inability to vindicate a liberal sketch of the historical Jesus, what can be gleaned as regards our own ‘revolutionary’ portrait, from Funk’s and Borg’s analysis of

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<sup>1582</sup> ‘note the conjunction καί at the beginning of v. 37’ J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930) p. 95.

<sup>1583</sup> The word is possibly too strong. Given our pluralistic society it can suit liberal Christians to see the Bible as just one religious tradition amongst many.

the Gospels? To facilitate a response let me set out what I see as the salient characteristics of the 'revolutionary' portrait for which we ourselves require textual vindication. For a 'revolutionary' portrait to be vindicated it will be necessary to prove the existence of the following features in the Gospel texts:

- A commitment to radical solidarity, seen negatively as a refusal to condemn others<sup>1584</sup> or to demand from them any sign of repentance.<sup>1585</sup>
- A commitment to radical solidarity, seen positively as a show of mercy and a willingness to forgive unconditionally.<sup>1586</sup>
- An offer of a welcoming relationship, extended to everyone who found himself or herself excluded from the Israelite community.<sup>1587</sup>
- A rejection of the world of privilege and a constant readiness to sacrifice personal advantage for the sake of those who risked falling out of the net.<sup>1588</sup>
- A recognition of the *superiority* of the viewpoint of the marginal.<sup>1589</sup>
- A recognition of the wickedness implicit in civilisations' righteousness which effectively justifies the marginalizing of people.<sup>1590</sup>
- A rejection of civilisations' habit of handing out privileging rewards and marginalizing punishments.<sup>1591</sup>

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<sup>1584</sup> 'Jesus did not accuse or judge those who knew themselves to be sinners.' Funk, *Honest* p. 213.

<sup>1585</sup> 'Jesus apparently did not even call on people to repent, and he did not practice baptism.' Funk, *Honest* p. 41

<sup>1586</sup> 'Jesus forgives because his Father forgives and on the same terms: without penalty or promise. The only requirement is reciprocity: one is forgiven to the extent that one forgives. Thus, one can become the recipient of forgiveness only if one first becomes the agent of forgiveness. By acknowledging that forgiveness is in the hands of the human agents, Jesus precludes the possibility of vesting that matter in the hands of priests or clerics or even God. The power to forgive has already been conferred upon those who themselves need and want forgiveness. Human beings can have only what they freely give away. Funk, *Honest* p. 311.

<sup>1587</sup> 'In contravention of the social order, Jesus was socially promiscuous: he ate and drank publicly with petty tax officials and "sinners," yet he did not refuse dinner with the learned and wealthy. He was seen in the company of women in public - an occasion for scandal in his society. He included children in his social circle - children were regarded as chattels, especially females, if they were permitted to live at birth - and advised that God's domain is filled with them.' Funk, *Honest* 196. 'The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus' table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.' Borg, *Meeting*, p. 56.

<sup>1588</sup> 'The playing field of life is level, according to Jesus. ... God does not privilege the status of the righteous and successful, in Jesus' view.' Funk, *Honest* p. 212. 'As John Dominic Crossan so pointedly puts it, Jesus robs humankind of all protections and privileges, entitlements and ethnicities that segregate human beings into categories. His Father is no respecter of persons.' Funk, *Honest* p. 311.

<sup>1589</sup> 'There is no stronger statement of Jesus' predilection for the outsider than the parable of the good Samaritan. ... only outsiders are admitted to God's estate. God has a preference for the lowly, the poor, the undeserving, the sinner, the social misfits, the marginalized, the humble. I doubt that there is any typification, any generalization, about the words and acts of Jesus in which we can have more confidence.' Funk, *Honest* p. 196.

<sup>1590</sup> 'There is no more poignant statement of his disdain for the priests, levites, and the temple than this story (of the Samaritan).' Funk, *Honest* p. 196. '[Jesus] was scathing in his criticism of the self-righteous and hypocritical.' Funk, *Honest* p. 213.

<sup>1591</sup> 'It is imagined in most human societies that penalties ought to be increased as a deterrent to crime and rewards enhanced as a further incentive to virtue. ... Jesus, on the other hand, was not impressed with the standard schedule of rewards and punishments.' Funk, *Honest* p. 213.

- A determination to keep concerns about money,<sup>1592</sup> food and clothing in proper perspective.<sup>1593</sup>
- A complete rejection of all coerciveness.<sup>1594</sup>
- A rejection of the prioritising of blood relationships.<sup>1595</sup>
- An absolute concentration on the work in hand (in demonstrating radical solidarity) the future being left entirely to others.<sup>1596</sup>
- A belief that a life lived in radical solidarity is never impossible<sup>1597</sup> and that it constitutes its own reward.<sup>1598</sup>
- A belief that against human expectation a life lived in radical solidarity will eventually be vindicated by the softening of civilisation hearts.<sup>1599</sup>

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<sup>1592</sup> 'Jesus reminds his listeners that it is difficult for those with money to get into God's domain. And he caricatures the rich farmer and big investor who plants, sows, and reaps in order to fill granaries for which he will have no use when he dies. Jesus further advises that it is impossible to be committed to both God and the almighty dollar.' Funk, *Honest* p. 213.

<sup>1593</sup> 'Human beings are concerned about food, clothing, shelter. Does that reflect lack of faith? Jesus seems to think so. ... The theme of much of Jesus' discourse concerns trust in God. ... Jesus advises one and all not to fret about food and clothing. ... His sayings on anxiety and on itinerancy suggest that he took no thought for shelter .. he was a vagabond sage. ... He recommends that his followers trust the Father for bread for one day at a time. He need not plan ahead since he is convinced: Ask - it'll be given you; seek - you'll find; knock - it'll be opened for you.' Funk, *Honest* pp. 211-12.

<sup>1594</sup> Neither Funk nor Borg mention this feature in the Gospels, which is not in fact compatible with liberalism as a revolutionary ideology. For obvious reasons they do not maintain Jesus was coercive though they both accord him a proactive strategy. So silence for them is the best policy.

<sup>1595</sup> 'Blood relationships are devalued in Jesus' idea of the family; his real family is the family of God. God's family is an extended family that embraces those on the margins of society in Jesus' time: lepers, toll collectors, women, children, Samaritans, enemies.' Funk, *Honest* p. 199.

<sup>1596</sup> 'This Jesus had nothing to say about himself, other than that he had no permanent address, no bed to sleep in, no respect on his home turf. He did not ask his disciples to convert the world and establish a church. ... He may have eaten a last meal with his followers, but he did not initiate what we know as the eucharist. In short, very little of what we associate with traditional Christianity originated with him.' Funk, *Honest* p. 41. Borg appears to part company with Funk here, arguing that Jesus should be seen as a movement founder: 'Jesus was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church. Borg, *Meeting* p. 30. See also Borg 2000 p. 11.

'Jesus was a movement initiator, by which I mean that a movement came into existence around him during his lifetime. Moreover, the practice and shape of his movement were not accidental; they were a deliberate embodiment of his alternative social vision, one that was inclusive and egalitarian.' However, it should be noted that Borg is careful not to claim that Jesus actually saw himself as the founder of a movement.

<sup>1597</sup> 'God's domain was for Jesus something already present. It was also something to be celebrated because it embraces everyone - Jew, gentile, slave, free, male, female. In God's domain, circumcision, keeping kosher, and Sabbath observance are extraneous.' Funk, *Honest* p. 41.

<sup>1598</sup> 'According to Jesus, reward is integral to the activity for which it is a reward. The reward for loving one's neighbour is an unqualified relation to that neighbour. ... If love is its own reward, why should human beings be rewarded for loving? Jesus asks rhetorically. ... A version of Christianity that takes its cues from Jesus cannot be preoccupied with rewards and punishments. Funk, *Honest* p. 312.

<sup>1599</sup> This, of course, is an aspect which liberals cannot admit as being in the texts since for them the kingdom has to be seen as an unrealisable ideal, whatever the texts indicate to the contrary: 'The kingdom of God for Jesus was always beyond the here and now; it was the world being created anew. It was always outstanding. About that world one can never be entirely explicit. All one can say is this: If you think you know what it is, you are mistaken. That future will be a perpetual surprise. If it were not so, human beings would trust themselves and not God.' Funk, *Honest* p. 160. Here Funk directly contradicts himself see note 1597 above.

This list of critical features when taken together constitutes, more or less, the full 'revolutionary' tableau. And, as can be seen from the attached notes (104 – 119), almost all of them are identified by Funk or Borg in the Gospel texts *even though neither of them has any interest in finding them there*. Of course they don't attribute the presence of these features to the existence of a 'revolutionary' ideology. Indeed they seldom give any hint from where they see these features as hailing spending their time rather in pointing out the importance of such features in undermining the conservative ideology in place. Whenever they do occasionally attempt to explain some feature the explanation itself is always bogus, as for example when Borg argues that in including women Jesus was being egalitarian:

Women were apparently part of the itinerant group travelling with Jesus. Indeed, they were apparently among his most devoted followers, as the stories of their presence at his death suggest. The movement itself was financially supported by some wealthy women. Moreover, the evidence is compelling that women played leadership roles in the post-Easter community. This is not to make the case that Jesus was a feminist; that would be an anachronism. But it does point to the radical social reality constituted by the Jesus movement in first-century Palestine. Within the movement itself, the sharp boundaries of the social world were subverted and an alternative vision affirmed and embodied. It was a 'discipleship of equals' embodying 'the egalitarian praxis' of Jesus' vision.<sup>1600</sup>

However attractive one may find this vision of a discipleship of equals embodying an egalitarian praxis it should be recognised that it is a liberal notion nowhere present in the Bible which has nothing to say about people being equal or having to behave to each other as equals. So if Jesus included women alongside all other categories of people excluded from the body of Israel, as Borg says, it could only have been because of his commitment to the god of the excluded marginals and the Hebrew 'revolutionary' ideology.

On one occasion, it seems to me, Funk deliberately misses the point. He is trying to explain why Jesus attacks the righteous:

The gospel of Jesus came to expression in the parables and aphorisms preserved in Q, Thomas, and other gospels. The message of the parables and aphorisms is first and foremost the announcement of good news: sinners and outcasts are welcome in God's kingdom; indeed, God's domain belongs to them. The bad news is that those who think they are leading upright lives will be surprised to learn that they have missed the messianic banquet, the great supper, because they were too preoccupied with misleading and deceptive aspects of life.<sup>1601</sup>

When you recall that Jesus called the righteous 'hypocrites', using the rather strange term third Isaiah employed when accusing the priestly hierocrats of Category One ideological sin,<sup>1602</sup> it seems odd to see this heinous crime against Yahweh himself described as being 'too preoccupied with misleading and deceptive aspects of life'! That is hardly a way of portraying the type of human behaviour which offends Yahweh to his very core. The truth is, of course, that Jesus attacked the righteous in such terms because their self-perception was the very thing which maintained marginals in their unbearable dustbinned predicament; something Funk does not apparently wish to see ... I wonder why?

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<sup>1600</sup> Borg, *Meeting* p. 37-8.

<sup>1601</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 41.

<sup>1602</sup> See pp. 442-445 above.

On another occasion Funk seems to stumble on the ‘revolutionary’ ideology in the texts, causing him to back-track hurriedly in horror. Recognising that Jesus believed God ‘has a preference for the lowly, the poor, the undeserving, the sinner, the social misfits’, and ‘the marginalized’ he quickly adds a rider just in case anyone should take the business of solidarity with such people too seriously:

At the same time, it is necessary to add: To aspire to one or more of these conditions as the means to salvation is to turn these same definitions into ‘insider’ categories.<sup>1603</sup>

Ostensibly, Funk is here reminding us of his liberal ideal, that an open and competitive state in search of an unattainable goal must at all times be maintained. However, it is undeniable that his declaration also has the effect of indicating to readers that, as he sees things, *radical solidarity in terms of moving your feet to put yourself alongside the marginals is not the issue*, whatever Jesus may have indicated to the contrary.

My conclusion is that Funk and Borg provide quite adequate verification for all of the features necessary for the vindication of our ‘revolutionary’ portrait, except on two occasions when the features in question are directly incompatible with their own liberal ideals.<sup>1604</sup>

#### *J. D. Crossan and a Socialist or Radical Reading of the Gospels*

We come now finally to John Dominic Crossan and a radical reading of the Gospels, remembering that we are using this term here to mean a revolutionary proletarian or peasant perspective that is distinct from the liberal variety. Of course we don’t yet know whether Crossan is indeed a radical in this sense and we are simply working on the suspicion that he might be! Let us first consider the advantages and disadvantages which radical biblical historians face when writing their works. The main advantage of having a radical perspective is that readers will be inclined to take you seriously when you speak of the Bible as subversive – as you surely have to do if you wish to be in any way true to the texts. Of course liberals like Funk and Borg themselves stress the Bible’s subversive character as they see it but it is increasingly hard to take them seriously, given their espousal of ideas which form the bedrock of the currently dominant, bourgeois ideology. There was a time, it is true, when the bourgeois class was openly revolutionary and when their liberal ideas were seen as radical. However, having now assumed power and taken the vanquished conservative rump in tow, liberals characteristically adopt an anti-revolutionary stance in order to protect their interests from the predations of their former proletarian allies. This makes it hard for people to credit the subversiveness of their ideas, for example when they use their particular notion of freedom to dismantle proletarian structures of solidarity such as the Trade Unions. So, for a radical biblicalist, seeing the Bible in terms of proletarian, or more correctly, peasant solidarity can easily establish the necessary subversive credentials. To do so, however, comes at a price. The disadvantage of such a reading is that a proletarian/peasant revolution constitutes a form of class-based coercion which is difficult to square with the biblical texts. For in spite of the efforts of S.G.F. Brandon in

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<sup>1603</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 196.

<sup>1604</sup> See notes 1594 and 1599 above.

arguing to the contrary<sup>1605</sup> it is not difficult to show that the Gospels portray Jesus as a peculiarly non-coercive figure. This, of course, is why it suits liberal biblical historians to try and make out that their Jesus not only subverts the dominance of conservative ideology but also opposes the coercive forces of socialism as well. In this way liberalism's own violent and revolutionary past is conveniently forgotten and the coerciveness of its present practices masked.

*An egalitarian society built from the bottom up*

Turning now to Crossan's portrait of the historical Jesus, here is his own outline sketch:

[Jesus] had received John's baptism and accepted his message of God as the imminent apocalyptic judge. But the Jordan was not just water, and to be baptized in it was to recapitulate the ancient and archetypal passage from imperial bondage to national freedom. Herod Antipas moved swiftly to execute John, there was no apocalyptic consummation, and Jesus, finding his own voice, began to speak of God not as imminent apocalypse but as present healing. To those first followers from the peasant villages of Lower Galilee who asked how to repay his exorcisms and cures, he gave a simple answer, simple, that is, to understand but hard as death itself to undertake. You are healed healers, he said, so take the Kingdom to others, for I am not its patron and you are not its brokers. It is, was, and always will be available to any who want it. Dress as I do, like a beggar, but do not beg. Bring a miracle and request a table. Those you heal must accept you into their homes.

That ecstatic vision and social program sought to rebuild a society upward from its grass roots but on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism, with free healing brought directly to the peasant homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return. The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal, miracle and table, free compassion and open commensality, was a challenge launched not just at Judaism's strictest purity regulations, or even at the Mediterranean's patriarchal combination of honour and shame, patronage and clientage, but at civilization's eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discriminations. It did not invite a political revolution but envisaged a social one at the imagination's most dangerous depths. No importance was given to distinctions of Gentile and Jew, female and male, slave and free, poor and rich. Those distinctions were hardly even attacked in theory; they were simply ignored in practice.<sup>1606</sup>

*Appreciation and criticism of Crossan's reading of the texts*

*John is not an apocalyptic mad-man as Crossan maintains  
and Jesus is not a revisionist as his logic would have it either*

I cannot fault Crossan's argument that the evidence suggests Jesus started out as a disciple of John but later developed his own understanding and approach. My only query is regarding the specific nature of the change involved. For Crossan it was strategic, the difference between preaching repentance while passively awaiting the imminent arrival of cataclysmic divine judgement – as with John – and actually rebuilding an egalitarian society from its grass-roots – as with Jesus. If Crossan is right and if we take this egalitarian society Jesus was concerned with as the kingdom of God, then on our own understanding (in which 'revolutionaries' leave the bringing in of the kingdom to God whereas revisionists are prepared to do the job themselves) John would appear to be a 'revolutionary' and Jesus a revisionist, which from our point of

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<sup>1605</sup> S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A study of the political factor in primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967)

<sup>1606</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. xi-xii

view can't be right.

The fact that Crossan portrays John as someone who had lost touch with reality, having an apocalyptic expectation which was bound to disappoint, suggests to me that he has got it wrong, there being no more reason to suppose that John was off his head, politically speaking, than Jesus was.<sup>1607</sup> That Crossan is indeed in error is further indicated by the fact that he portrays Jesus to be viewing the kingdom consistently as something he and his disciples were in the process of building, when, as Sanders has clearly shown, the texts themselves characteristically describe Jesus as speaking of the kingdom, to the contrary, as a future event. Could it be, as Wright suggests, that Crossan has been misled by the modern misunderstanding of apocalyptic expectation?<sup>1608</sup> According to our own 'revolutionary' view John's error lay not in the fact that his expectations were futuristic, involving difficult-if-not-impossible-to-predict divine acts. Rather, his error was that, like Elijah, he foolishly expected something dramatic, grandiose and aggressive from Yahweh on a par with a hurricane, earthquake or general conflagration and so failed to notice the incredible non-coercive power of what was actually happening very quietly and unassumingly before his very eyes:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you he who should come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me.'<sup>1609</sup>

In my view it is much easier to picture John as falling into this common 'revolutionary' error of blind-eying the actual changes taking place under one's very nose because they lack a certain grandeur than it is to see him as succumbing to Crossan's so-called 'apocalypticism' or fleeing from reality, given our understanding that this latter is a mental disorder naturally associated with weak, conservative, nationalistic groups.<sup>1610</sup> Of course Crossan himself does not rate the above saying because it has only a single attestation (Q2).<sup>1611</sup> However, given the evidence that John's teaching was thoroughly 'revolutionary', at least to the extent that he firmly dismissed Israel's pretensions of introducing the kingdom all by herself (a matter on which, pace Crossan, I believe Jesus completely agreed) it is the only clear indication we have of how Jesus saw the difference lying between him and John.

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<sup>1607</sup> cf Sanders' Jewish salvation history model above pp. 483-485.

<sup>1608</sup> 'I believe that Crossan, in common (be it said) with the great majority of New Testament scholars, has misunderstood the nature of apocalyptic. Just as Crossan 'reads' Jesus' healings, and his open table-fellowship, as indicating a profoundly subversive intent within the world of his day, so I have argued elsewhere that 'apocalyptic' writings, and Daniel in particular, were read in the first century as describing *not* 'the darkening scenario of an imminent end to the world' but the radical subversion of the present world order. This necessitates a thorough redrawing of Crossan's antithesis (in line with the Jesus Seminar) between 'apocalyptic' and 'sapiential'. 'Apocalyptic' is not about a god doing something and humans merely spectating. It invests human political and social action with its full theological significance.' N. T. Wright, *Victory*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>1609</sup> Mt 11.2-6.

<sup>1610</sup> 'Apocalypticism is the counterattack of those who perceive themselves to be marginalized religiously and/or theologically, spiritually and/or materially, politically and/or economically, at a level too profound for any less radical solution. The disease is fatal; only transcendental intervention can effect a cure. It is against such an understanding that I consider apocalypticism in the Q Gospel.' Crossan, *Birth*, p. 263.

<sup>1611</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 441.

In fact Crossan clarifies his view of this matter in his later work: *The Birth of Christianity*.<sup>1612</sup> Here he argues that what he labels as *apocalyptic eschatology* (or *apocalypticism*) which is to say that attitude he believes was displayed by John, as well as by the author responsible for the later redactional strata in Q (Q<sub>2</sub>) – though not by Jesus himself – is characterised by two non-negotiable aspects. The first is that the primary event is an imagined or invoked interventional act of overwhelming divine power and the second is that this event brings to an end all evil and injustice in the world.<sup>1613</sup> Crossan claims that the combination of these twin aspects in apocalyptic eschatology ‘almost invariably presumes a violent God who establishes the justice of non-violence through the injustice of violence’:

.. all too often, be it of pagans by Jews or of Jews by Christians, apocalypticism is perceived as a divine ethnic cleansing whose genocide heart presumes a violent God of revenge rather than a non-violent God of justice.

I have no quarrel with Crossan’s final point: that in so far as John – and the redactor of Q<sub>2</sub> – believed Yahweh’s salvation would manifest itself *as a great show of compelling, violent strength* they set themselves (like Elijah before them?) against the Biblical (Hebrew ‘revolutionary’?) tradition.<sup>1614</sup> For, as I see it, according to this ‘revolutionary’ biblical tradition Yahweh’s salvation comes about hiatically, which is to say inconsequentially: simply as a result of a finally inexplicable softening of human hearts. As such *it cannot be described in historical terms at all*, for though it is certainly true to say that in this world a softening of civilisation hearts only ever comes about as a result of some concrete demonstration of radical solidarity in action, it cannot properly be said that it is the *natural* consequence of such a demonstration. For, as we all know only too well, a demonstration of radical solidarity mounted by marginals is rightly seen by civilisation folk as an attack on their overweening craving for a world of privilege (of having something of value that others don’t have) the *natural* result being a hardening, not a softening, of civilisation’s hearts. Given that I see Yahweh’s salvation in terms of the humanly inexplicable softening of civilisation hearts (civilisation’s abandonment of a world of privilege in favour of a world of radical solidarity) my problem is not with Crossan’s conclusion (that there is an obvious error in envisioning a universe of non-violence established violently). My problem is with his argument that apocalyptic thinking, as he himself describes it, almost invariably leads to such an erroneous way of thinking and consequent self-delusion. For, as I see it, each of the twin aspects which he claims make up ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ constitute a *sine qua non* of all truly ‘revolutionary’ biblical thought. To put it bluntly, all

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<sup>1612</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999)

<sup>1613</sup> ‘One aspect is that the primary event is an interventional act of God. Human actors may certainly be important in *preparation*, by their sufferings, in initiation, by their symbolic activities, or even in *cooperation*, by military action under angelic or divine control. All of those human details may be open for discussion, but what is not debatable is that some intervening act of overwhelming divine power is imagined and invoked. In plain language, we are waiting for God. The other aspect that is not negotiable is the total absence of evil and injustice after the apocalyptic consummation takes place. It will not be just a case of kinder, gentler injustice but of a perfectly just world. There will be no evil or evildoers in this postapocalyptic world.’ Crossan, *Birth*, p. 283.

<sup>1614</sup> Though this is certainly a political error I do not consider it in the same light as revisionism. Revisionism is a deliberate attempt to rewrite the ‘revolution’. Elijah’s error was more a question of taking one’s eye off the ball.



‘revolutionary’ biblical writers from the Yahwist onwards envisaged salvation as ‘an interventional act of overwhelming divine power’ and, likewise, all ‘revolutionary’ biblical writers envisaged salvation as ‘bringing to an end all evil and injustice in the world’. For how else could one envisage such an inexplicable, universal softening of civilisation hearts and its net result? Indeed the only biblical writers who viewed matters differently were the conservative revisionists who saw salvation as something they were capable of introducing themselves under God’s guidance, albeit in a partial manner. It would seem therefore that Crossan seeks to pattern his understanding of Jesus’ own thinking on revisionist rather than ‘revolutionary’ biblical thought forms, where God acts only in so far as to display his basic nature, leaving it to humans to construct a society that conforms with this revealed pattern. I find Crossan’s choice strange since I can detect nothing in the least bit conservative in what he himself says. That said I certainly see that such a choice facilitates his task as an historian since it removes historically inexplicable hiatus acts from consideration! As ever, I remain divided on this crucial point. On the one hand everything tells me that nothing in this world (not even the worst kind of global warming) is capable of convincing civilisation folk to give up their world of privilege. On the other hand everything tells me that if civilisation hearts are not softened civilisation itself is undoubtedly doomed. So which am I to give-up: hope or history?

*Baptism in the Jordan is a ‘revolutionary’ symbol of repentance for John.*

*It is not a conservative symbol of national liberation as Crossan maintains.*

One further interesting aspect of Crossan’s understanding of Jesus’ beginnings as a disciple of John is his description of baptism in the Jordan as constituting ‘a recapitulation of the ancient and archetypal passage from imperial bondage to national freedom’. As we have previously noted<sup>1615</sup> Crossan has little if anything to say about the extent to which Jesus’ own ideology was based on biblical tradition and, in his sketch (see above), this is the only information concerning this tradition that he offers, it being noticeable that even this titbit only affects Jesus to the dubious extent to which he is supposed to have shared John’s thinking. It goes without saying, of course, that crossing the Jordan and the sea of reeds are seen in the Bible as representing Yahweh’s salvation. However, this is not the same thing as claiming that these water-crossings represent ‘a passage from imperial bondage to national freedom’ as Crossan maintains. That may well have been the way in which many Jews including the Zealots saw things. However, from the Bible’s own ‘revolutionary’ viewpoint, such thinking amounted to visualising salvation in typical conservative ‘Jewish salvation history’ terms.<sup>1616</sup> We have to believe that as a true ‘revolutionary’ John saw himself to be calling on all Israel to repent *in order to be able to fulfil her task of being the light to lighten the Gentiles*. He did not baptize people in the Jordan and then expect them to return to their dwellings to sit twiddling their thumbs in a state of purity till the great moment of national liberation arrived. How exactly he understood the process of salvation is difficult to say since we have only got one or two sayings to go on. However, there is no indication he saw it as involving a process of national liberation and every indication that he didn’t. For John, Israel was clearly not the point, whereas

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<sup>1615</sup> See p. 14 above.

<sup>1616</sup> See pp. 477-480 above.

the world was.

*Jesus' idea of justice was not better because it was eschatological as Crossan maintains. It was better because it came from a marginal perspective.*

Once again Crossan, in his later work, *The Birth of Christianity*, seeks to clarify his understanding of Jesus' own ideas vis-à-vis traditional biblical thinking. After having swiftly reviewed the Old Testament<sup>1617</sup> he concludes that whereas most of the high gods in the ancient Near East were properly concerned with justice and righteousness, Yahweh was quite different in that he was seen as being the god of justice and righteousness *by his very nature*.<sup>1618</sup> Consequently, whereas the other high gods happily presided over slave societies in which inequality was endemic, Yahweh was seen by biblical writers to demand radical egalitarianism in Israel.

'... it is rather easy to be in favour of justice and righteousness. Few individuals, groups, or divinities proclaim themselves against such virtues or in favour of injustice and unrighteousness. But, on the other hand, the biblical texts indicate repeatedly what exactly such justice entails. And the logic behind that divine justice is human equality, a radical egalitarianism that shows itself not in abstract manifestos but in specific laws. ... You will not find in the Hebrew Bible any manifestos announcing that all people or even all Jews are equal. Neither will you find assertions that slavery is unnatural or against the will of God. But you will find there decrees and decisions, threats and promises that make sense only on the presumption that the justice of God strives insistently against inequality among God's people.'<sup>1619</sup>

Crossan uses this basic egalitarian understanding, which he believes he finds in Yahwism, to affirm Jesus' own position – as this is presented in the earliest strata of Q and Thomas. He calls it *ethicism* or *eschatological ethics*, a position which has to be seen as standing over-against John's and Q2's *apocalyptic eschatology* and Thomas' *ascetical* (not to say Gnostic) *eschatology*:

Ethicism, short for ethical eschatology, is ethical radicalism with a divine mandate based on the character of God. What makes it *radical* or *eschatological* ethics is, above all else, the fact that it is nonviolent resistance to structural violence. It is absolute faith in a nonviolent God and the attempt to live and act in union with such a God. I do *not* hold that apocalypticism and asceticism are not ethical. Of course they are. It may also be ethical to go to war in the name of an avenging God. But all ethics is not eschatological or divinely radical. Ethical eschatology is, by definition as I see it, nonviolent resistance to systemic violence.<sup>1620</sup>

While I think I can see what he is driving at I find Crossan's argument that egalitarian (i.e. left-wing) justice is somehow more godly than hierarchical (i.e. right-wing) justice specious. Furthermore I find it impossible to follow him in differentiating between a god who advocates justice and a god who *by his very nature* advocates justice. For the people of the ancient Near East the ideological character of a deity was known by his or her behaviour. Thus if a god advocated justice he had to be seen as a god who by his nature advocated justice. The difference between Enlil and Yahweh, both of whom

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<sup>1617</sup> See Crossan, *Birth*, pp. 186-208.

<sup>1618</sup> 'It is not that Israel's God is one among many or even one *over* many gods. Israel's God is the one true God of all the earth and all the nations because this alone is a God of justice and righteousness for those systemically vulnerable, for the weak, the orphan, the lowly, the destitute, and the needy. This God stands against injustice and wickedness because that is the nature and character of this God. The gods and their nations have failed the wretched of the earth.' Crossan, *Birth*, p. 208.

<sup>1619</sup> Crossan, *Birth*, p. 183.

<sup>1620</sup> Crossan, *Birth*, p. 287.

advocated the defence of the widow and orphan, was not that one advocated justice whilst the other did the same thing *because that was his nature and character*. The difference was that Enlil advocated and dispensed *hierarchical* justice whereas Yahweh advocated and dispensed justice *of a different political hue*. For the same reason I find it bogus for Crossan to argue that biblical ethics was somehow different because it was more radical ('fundamental') in being eschatological. What we are dealing with here is justice and ethics seen from different *human* perspectives and it is quite wrong for Crossan to imply that Jesus was somehow capable of getting behind human ideological vision to a more fundamental, godly view of things. Having said that I believe he is quite right in suggesting that Yahweh represented justice and ethics as these ideas were seen from the point of view of those systemically vulnerable; the weak, the orphan, the lowly, the destitute, and the needy, the political colouring of Israel's understanding of justice and ethics being *marginal* rather than *egalitarian*.

Like Funk and Borg Crossan describes the historical Jesus as challenging the world of dominance which everyone in first century Palestine faced. However, unlike them, he shows he perfectly understands the danger of reading modern, liberal, middle-class ideas back into the texts.<sup>1621</sup> One of Crossan's great strengths is the way in which he employs every available means to understand this oppressive world, using not simply literary remains but also cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology as well as Hellenistic and Greco-Roman history. He believes the geo-political scene in first century Palestine has to be understood in general Mediterranean terms in which a world of dominance, situated in fertile riverine basins, is offset against an egalitarian, peasant world in the marginal hills.<sup>1622</sup> He sees first century Mediterranean communities as structured on a system of patronage, not on class stratification as is the case in modern society.<sup>1623</sup> He describes this set-up, in which a client of a patron becomes himself the

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<sup>1621</sup> 'When the equestrian Augustus became emperor, he and his dynasty vaulted far above the senatorial elite, and, with order and power no longer synonymous, the days of the senatorial aristocracy were numbered. Too-powerful senators became a doomed species. ... Too-rich freemen were also a doomed species. But none of those anomalies served to create a middle class. The time was not ripe ... there was no powerful capitalist class between the land-owning aristocracy and the poor. ... Sir Ronald Syme wrote a great work on Augustus that he called *The Roman Revolution*. But there was no revolution in the Marxist sense. ... The French Revolution was a 'bourgeois' revolution and brought to power persons whose wealth came from trade and manufacturing rather than land. No such revolution took place in Rome.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 57-8.

<sup>1622</sup> '... the Mediterranean is ecologically homogeneous, ... this unity derives from the consistent juxtaposition of opposites within nations, the close proximity of rugged topography with fertile riverine basins. It is this international contrast between remote, inaccessible mountain peaks and rich agricultural valleys that lies at the heart of Mediterranean ecosystems. Throughout the region, one finds independent, egalitarian communities of peasants, tribesmen, or pastoralists in the marginal hills and in the adjacent plains something vastly different - the latifundium, the great estate, the commercial farm, heir to the Roman villa ... often worked by day labourers under harsh conditions'. Crossan, *Historical*, p. 5. Crossan is here quoting with approval David Gilmore's comments on Fernand Braudel's work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>1623</sup> 'If antiquity, unlike modernity, had no middle class, what did its social structure look like? The comparison is spelled out very clearly by Thomas Carney. He describes antiquity as a society based on patronage, not class stratification; so little pyramids of power abounded ... Thus society resembled a mass of little pyramids of influence, each headed by a major family-or one giant pyramid headed by an autocrat-not the three-decker sandwich of upper, middle, and lower classes familiar to us from industrial

patron to a second order client, as a system of brokerage and explains how it makes for a very unequal society which is often extremely repressive.<sup>1624</sup>

All of this is extremely important and helpful; however, what really interests me is the ideology that underpinned Mediterranean brokerage society. Crossan clearly sees it as one of dominance, though not of class hierarchy. He also categorises it in terms of honour and shame:

Honour and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office. Within the minimal solidary groups of these societies, be they small or large families or clans, spheres of action are well defined, non-overlapping and non-competitive. The opposite is true outside these groups. What is significant in this wider context is the insecurity and instability of the honour-shame ranking.... In this insecure, individualist, world where nothing is accepted on credit, the individual is constantly forced to prove and assert himself. Whether as the protagonist of his group or as a self-seeking individualist, he is constantly 'on show,' he is forever courting the public opinion of his 'equals' so that they may pronounce him worthy.<sup>1625</sup>

*Jesus' ideology was not a vague peasant egalitarianism as Crossan argues*

So much for the world of dominance which Jesus faced. What now of Jesus' own ideology? As we have already seen the word Crossan invariably uses to describe it is 'egalitarian'. As I have previously argued the problem in using this word is that it is a modern concept unknown in biblical times. Unlike Funk and Borg Crossan shows he is perfectly aware of this and I have to say I cannot detect any trace of liberalism in his portrait of Jesus. Indeed it is this feature which marks out his position against theirs as radical. Commenting on Jesus' practice of sharing a table with everyone without discrimination and his own description of this practice as constituting an egalitarian social challenge Crossan writes:

[I]s all of this (talk of egalitarian social challenge) simply projecting a contemporary democratic idealism anachronistically back onto the performance of the historical Jesus? I emphasize most strongly, for now and the rest of this book, that such egalitarianism stems not only from peasant Judaism but, even more deeply, from peasant society as such. "The popular religion and culture of peasants in a complex society are not only a syncretized, domesticated, and localized variant of larger systems of thought and doctrine. They contain almost inevitably the seeds of an alternative symbolic universe - a universe which in turn makes the social world in which peasants live less than completely inevitable. Much of this radical symbolism can only be explained as a

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society ... The client of a power wielder thus becomes a powerful man and himself in turn attracts clients. Even those marginal hangers-on to power attract others, more disadvantageously placed, as their clients. So arise the distinctive pyramids of power-patron, then first order clients, then second and third order clients and so on-associated with a patronage society.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 59

<sup>1624</sup> 'In his extremely useful 1982 survey of Mediterranean anthropology, David Gilmore notes that "Mediterranean societies are all undercapitalized agrarian civilizations. They are characterized by sharp social stratification and by both a relative and absolute scarcity of natural resources. There is little social mobility. Power is highly concentrated in a few hands, and the bureaucratic functions of the state are poorly developed. These conditions are of course ideal for the development of patron-client ties and a dependency ideology ... patronage relations provide a consistent ideological support for social inequality and dependency throughout the Mediterranean area." ... Whether, then, in the ancient or modern world, and whether between individuals or nations, the patron and client relationship is one of exploitation at best and repression at worst. Like the relationship of master and slave, it is presumably (we hope) a dying phenomenon - even if the death watch, as in the former case, takes centuries.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 67-68.

<sup>1625</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 10.

cultural reaction to the situation of the peasantry *as a class*. In fact, this symbolic opposition represents the closest thing to class consciousness in pre-industrial agrarian societies. It is as if those who find themselves at the bottom of the social heap develop cultural forms which promise them dignity, respect, and economic comfort which they lack in the world as it is. A real pattern of exploitation dialectically produces its own symbolic mirror image within folk culture". That quotation is from a fascinating analysis by James Scott, moving from Europe to Southeast Asia, noting the Little Tradition's common reaction to such disparate Great Traditions as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, and arguing very persuasively that peasant culture and religion is actually an anticulture, qualifying alike both the religious and political elites that oppress it. It is, in fact, a reflexive and reactive inversion of the pattern of exploitation common to the peasantry *as such*. "The radical vision to which I refer," he continues, "is strikingly uniform despite the enormous variations in peasant cultures and the different great traditions of which they partake.... At the risk of over generalizing, it is possible to describe some common features of this reflexive symbolism. It nearly always implies a society of brotherhood in which there will be no rich and poor, in which no distinctions of rank and status (save those between believers and non believers) will exist. Where religious institutions are experienced as justifying inequities, the abolition of rank and status may well include the elimination of religious hierarchy in favour of communities of equal believers. Property is typically, though not always, to be held in common and shared. All unjust claims to taxes, rents, and tribute are to be nullified. The envisioned utopia may also include a self-yielding and abundant nature as well as a radically transformed human nature in which greed, envy, and hatred will disappear. While the earthly utopia is thus an anticipation of the future, it often harks back to a mythic Eden from which mankind has fallen away".<sup>1626</sup>

Crossan<sup>1627</sup> here emphasises that Jesus' own thinking has to be seen as based not just on Judean peasant thinking but on peasant thinking in general. He argues that there was no specific world-view or ideology common to Mediterranean peasants in antiquity since no peasant class-consciousness had as yet arisen. However, he suggests there was the next best thing, which he describes variously as 'an alternative symbolic universe', 'an anticulture', and a 'radical vision'. Such a vision, though it could not be said to constitute an identifiable way of thinking, nonetheless operated as a sort of dialectically-produced 'mirror image', 'reflection' or 'inversion' of the dominance, honour/shame, patron/client brokerage-thinking which certainly did exist. Given this understanding, Crossan uses the word egalitarianism to signify this 'reflective symbolism' which he supposes Jesus, as a peasant artisan, shared with all those in the lower classes of first century Palestine.<sup>1628</sup> The trouble with this is that when Crossan actually specifies particular aspects of Jesus' thinking we find these far more radical than anything contained in the thinking of peasant societies of any age. For example he points out that in speaking about a kingdom of the 'poor' Jesus was referring not to the poor peasant classes but rather to the down-and-out beggars.<sup>1629</sup> What peasant

<sup>1626</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 263-4. The quotations from James Scott are taken from *Protest and Profanation: Agrarian revolt and the Little Tradition in Theory and Society* 1977. pp. 224-226.

<sup>1627</sup> Since Crossan clearly agrees with what James Scott writes I make no distinction between them.

<sup>1628</sup> Following Gerhard Lenski Crossan works with a model in which ancient agrarian societies are seen as being divided into five upper and four lower classes. The upper classes consisting of 1) The ruler. 2) The Governing class. 3) The retainer class. 4) The merchant class. 5) The priestly class. The lower classes consisting of 1) The peasants. 2) The artisans. 3) The unclean and degraded class 4) The expendables.

<sup>1629</sup> 'Aristophanes might create a goddess known as Poverty, the divine personification of the deserving and hard-working poor, and so quite appropriately opposed to the leisured laziness of the idle rich, but he created no goddess known as Beggary, gave no apotheosis to Destitution. That is, however, exactly what Jesus did. He spoke, in shocking paradox, not about a Kingdom of the Poor but about a Kingdom of the Destitute. ... The beatitude of Jesus declared blessed, then, not the poor but the destitute, not

community would have seen itself or its aspiration from such a view-point? Again, in speaking of Jesus' claim that the kingdom is 'for those alone who are like children', Crossan highlights very movingly that Jesus' point is not about the need to become humble, innocent or celibate but rather the need to become a nobody<sup>1630</sup> – a state no peasant community would have dreamed about for itself. Again, in referring to Jesus' statements about family splits Crossan points out that Jesus is not simply saying that families will be divided over him but that because of him 'the hierarchical or patriarchal family will be torn apart along the axis of domination and subordination'.<sup>1631</sup> Was this something peasant communities would have stomached, let alone advocated? Finally, commenting on Jesus' parable of The Banquet, Crossan makes the point that as a statement of Jesus' practice of open commensality the parable is far more radical than is generally assumed. A person might well have been honoured in first century peasant society for specially inviting social outcasts for a meal but the idea of sitting down at table with just anyone found on the streets would have been deemed entirely dishonourable in peasant society; yet that is precisely what Jesus advocates in his story.<sup>1632</sup>

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poverty but beggary. Recall, for a moment, Gerhard Lenski's typology of stratification in agrarian societies from the first section of this book. In its terms, Jesus spoke of a Kingdom not of the Peasant or Artisan classes but of the Unclean, Degraded, and Expendable classes.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 269.

<sup>1630</sup> '[W]hat would ordinary Galilean peasants have thought about children? Would "like a child" have immediately meant being humble, being innocent, being new, being credulous? Go back, if you will, to those papyrus fragments quoted in chapter 1 of this book and think for a moment of infants, often female but male as well, abandoned at birth by their parents and saved from the rubbish dumps to be reared as slaves. Pagan writers were ... rather surprised that Jewish parents did not practice such potential infanticide, but still, to be a child was to be a nobody, with the possibility of becoming a somebody absolutely dependent on parental discretion and parental standing in the community. That, I think, is the heart of the matter with all other allusions or further interpretations clustering around that central and shocking metaphor. A kingdom of the humble, of the celibate, or of the baptized comes later. This comes first: a kingdom of children is a kingdom of nobodies. And if "it is an insult for an adult to be compared to children" as Wendy Cotter rightly emphasizes concerning ... the ancient honour and shame societies of the Mediterranean world, what happens when a Kingdom is announced for those alone who are like children?' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 269.

<sup>1631</sup> '(Luke 12:51-53 = Matthew 10:34-36) ... is not simply saying that families will be split over Jesus, with some believing and some disbelieving. The division imagined cuts between the generations, the two parents against the three children, and vice versa. But it does not tell us which group is on Jesus' side. We cannot presume that parents are against Jesus and children are for him, or vice versa. Indeed, the point is not belief or disbelief at all. It is, just as in Micah 7:6, the normalcy of familial hierarchy that is under attack. The strife is not between believers and non-believers but quite simply, and as it says, between the generations and in both directions. Jesus will tear the hierarchical or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 300.

<sup>1632</sup> 'In the first as in the twentieth century, a person might create a feast for society's outcasts. That could easily be understood even or especially in the honour and shame ideology of Mediterranean society as a benefaction and one of deliberately high visibility. No doubt if one did it persistently and exclusively there might be some very negative social repercussions. But, in itself, to invite the outcasts for a special meal is a less socially radical act than to invite anyone found on the streets. It is that "anyone" that negates the very social function of table, namely, to establish a social ranking by what one eats, how one eats, and with whom one eats. It is the random and open commensality of the parable's meal that is its most startling element. One could, in such a situation, have classes, sexes, ranks, and grades all mixed up together. The social challenge of such egalitarian commensality is the radical threat of the parable's vision. It is only a story, of course, but it is one that focuses its egalitarian challenge on society's mesocosmic mirror, the table as the place where bodies meet to eat. And the almost predictable counteraccusation to such open commensality is immediate: Jesus is a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of

*Jesus most certainly had a clear and well thought-out ideology: a god-of-the-marginals ideology in fact.*

While greatly admiring Crossan's skill in identifying the radical nature of these sayings I find it difficult to follow him when he suggests that Jesus was simply operating according to some intangible symbolism which mirrored the oppressive dominance of the honour/shame ideology in place. He is right, of course, to insist that Jesus was not passing judgement according to some Jewish religious or cultural norm for *the wisdom Jesus advocated in these sayings is equally pertinent for everyone, regardless of their culture or creed*. This ties in well with Crossan's hypothesis that Jesus operated with an inverse symbolic universe. What troubles me, however, is the fact that everything we know about human beings leads one to believe that they actually operate on a basis of individual and collective interests rather than according to their perception of symbolic universes, whether or not such things exist. Furthermore it seems undeniable that Jesus himself had an extremely clear and well thought-out understanding of what he was about and this suggests *he possessed an ideology and that he was not simply speaking from some vague, anti-domineering, symbolic-world perspective*. What is more, this ideology Jesus operated with was clearly not a peasant ideology since, as Crossan himself has so powerfully shown, *no peasant society that has ever existed would have felt in the least bit comfortable with the marginal viewpoint Jesus proposed*. It seems to me the conclusion to be drawn is inescapable: Jesus was a 'revolutionary' who operated with a god of the marginals ideology. What surprises me is that Crossan doesn't seem to see it.

*It is most unlikely that Jesus strategy was to build up society from its grass roots for, according to third Isaiah, that would have been seen as interfering in what was God's covenantal responsibility.*

I myself have argued that according to the 'revolutionary' model Jesus was concerned to fulfil the Law and the Prophets by calling on his fellow countrymen to join with him in demonstrating what it meant to be a community living together in radical solidarity. Apparently knowing nothing of this, Crossan feels obliged to come up with an alternative strategy. Noting the multiply attested reference to Jesus' sending of disciples on missions<sup>1633</sup> and the missionary activity of the early Church, he puts it all together and, not unnaturally, concludes that Jesus' strategy was to 'rebuild a society upward from its grass roots on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism, with free healing brought directly to the peasant homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return.' This is an astute move since it provides a way of side-stepping the principal disadvantage of a radical view of the Gospels – the coercive attitude all revolutions involve – since, as Crossan says, 'the deliberate conjunction of magic and meal ... did not invite a political revolution but envisaged a social one at the imagination's most dangerous depths.' There is a problem, however, for if Jesus' strategy was to rebuild a

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tax collectors and sinners. He makes, in other words, no appropriate distinctions and discriminations. He has no honor. He has no shame.' Crossan, *Historical*, p. 262.

<sup>1633</sup> 1+. *Mission and Message*: (1a) 1 Cor. 9:14; (1b) 1 Cor. 10:27; (2) Gos. Thom. 14:2; (3) 1Q: Luke 10:(1), 4-11 = Matt. 10:7, 10b, 12-14; (4) Mark 6:7-13 = Matt. 10:1, 8-10a, 11 = Luke 9:1-6; (5) *Dial. Sav.* 53b [139:9-10]; (6) *Did.* 11-13 [see 11:4-6 & 13:1-2]; (7) 1 Tim. 5:18b. Crossan, *Historical*, p. 434.

society he had a very strange way of going about it. You see such an aim constitutes a long-term project necessitating forward-planning and organisation, whereas Jesus' work was characterised by a breathless élan, immediacy and disregard for what was to come afterwards, at least as the evangelists describe things. For according to them Jesus wrote nothing down, created no structure or organisation, knew nothing about delegation, was constantly on the move, had no headquarters, communicated by means of throw-away stories or pithy remarks involving no detail. What is more when he was arrested and taken for execution everything was left in such a terrible mess that it is a miracle anything came of what he had done ... at least as someone like Napoleon, a revolutionary and true master of the art of rebuilding society, would have deemed. Indeed if Jesus was concerned with social architecture then a measure of his incompetence is to be seen in the fact that, wrong-footed at the last moment, he was obliged to hurriedly concoct some way of looking after his widowed mother as he hung dying on a Roman cross!

Of course it could be said that all of this points to a certain hands-off genius since the fact of the matter is that Jesus' movement did survive, flourish and eventually spread all over the world, though many now argue this was largely thanks to Paul, a disciple Jesus never knew. However, it seems to me that what these characteristics in fact indicate is something altogether different: that Jesus had no thought whatsoever to 'rebuild' civilisation – the old revisionist project of attempting to bring in the Kingdom off your own bat – however much this *may possibly* have become the aim of the early Church.<sup>1634</sup> All the textual evidence convinces me Jesus lived his life with one thing and one thing alone in mind: fulfilling Israel's obligation as the servant of Yahweh, god of the marginals. Between these two fundamentally different strategies – fulfilling the covenant and 'rebuilding civilisation' (or whatever the early Church saw itself as doing) lay the resurrection, a landmark indicating the frontier between two ages, a matter to which we will shortly turn.

### *Jesus and miracles*

One thing that stands out in Crossan's sketch of the historical Jesus is the centrality of miracles in Jesus' 'magic and meal' strategy for rebuilding society. However, before we can decide for ourselves what part miracles played in Jesus' work it is first necessary to ascertain what they consisted of as a historical phenomena.

### Miracles as a religious or ideological phenomenon

To put it bluntly, regardless of what Jesus himself or his disciples thought, should we see miracles 'religiously', as successful attempts to open up a pathway to the deity in order to tap healing power into the patient or client? Or should we instead see them 'ideologically', as expressions of the political power the miracle worker acquires in terms of charismatic influence and effectiveness, through the adoption of a particular world-view? In other words does a miracle, as a concrete manifestation of power witnessed to in some event, arrive transcendentally from outside the universe, thanks to

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<sup>1634</sup> I am not altogether persuaded the early Church did fall into this trap but it is not an argument I can pursue here.



an act of grace or favour performed by some deity in response to some human's prayer or petition; or does it come about internally, thanks to the adoption of a particular perspective which then is spoken about in religious terms as the best means of expression to hand?

### 1. Sanders on miracles

Given the starkness of this choice between a religious or scientific explanation it is natural for Christian biblical commentators to try to avoid the issue if they can. Sanders recognises that some people find it necessary to see miracles in scientific terms.<sup>1635</sup> However, he states very openly that his concern is in understanding what Jesus and his disciples thought<sup>1636</sup> which means that he is happy at the end of the day to leave the matter of the exact nature of the miracles unresolved. That said, he makes it clear he believes the disciples and even Jesus himself considered them as signs of Jesus' close proximity to God and this of itself implies a religious perspective in which Jesus is seen to operate in the normal conservative mould: as a broker in the God/man patron/client relationship.<sup>1637</sup> At the same time Sanders covers himself by attributing such a religious belief to Jesus and his disciples, remaining purposely vague about his own personal stance as a scientific historian.

### 2. Funk and Borg on miracles

Whereas Sanders and Crossan have a considerable amount to say about miracles, both Funk and Borg are extremely reticent about the subject, probably because neither a religious nor an ideological understanding of miracles can be easily fitted into their liberal scheme. Embarrassingly, it seems they can neither deny the evidence that Jesus was a miracle worker nor find a way of making anything of it!<sup>1638</sup> In one of his later works Borg makes some attempt to affirm his credentials as a scientific historian, arguing that at least some of the miracles are best understood 'as symbolic narratives rather than as historically factual reports'.<sup>1639</sup> However, Funk appears to fudge this

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<sup>1635</sup> 'The need for rational explanations is a modern one. The numerous efforts have a conservative aim: if Jesus' miracles can be explained rationally, it is easier for modern people to continue to believe that the Bible is true. That is, true in the modern sense: historically accurate and scientifically sound. I think that some rationalist explanations are so far-fetched that they damage the overall effort, but that the principle is partly right. Ancient people attributed to supernatural powers (good or evil spirits) what modern people explain in other ways. It is perfectly reasonable for us to explain ancient events in our own terms. In my opinion, it is plausible to explain an exorcism as a psychosomatic cure. It is, however, an error to think that rational explanations of the miracles can establish that the gospels are entirely factual. Some of the miracle stories cannot be explained on the basis of today's scientific knowledge.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 159.

<sup>1636</sup> 'The more important task for the purpose of this book, however, is to make clear how Jesus' contemporaries and near-contemporaries viewed miracles.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 159.

<sup>1637</sup> 'In addition to seeing [Jesus] as a holy man, intimate with God, [the disciples] also thought that in his work the forces of good were defeating the forces of evil that afflict humanity.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 166. 'We see here the same self-conception that is evident in the miracles. Through him, Jesus held, God was acting directly and immediately, bypassing the agreed, biblically sanctioned ordinances, reaching out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel with no more mediation than the words and deeds of one man - himself.' Sanders, *Figure* p. 236-7.

<sup>1638</sup> Funk totally ignores the miracles in his book. Borg, for his part, admits that all the evidence suggests Jesus was a healer and exorcist but is happy to leave it at that. (See Borg, *Meeting*, pp 31, 36.)

<sup>1639</sup> Borg, *2000* p. 128.

issue:

I am often asked, "Is it not possible that Jesus walked on the water?" My answer to that question can only be "Of course. Nothing is impossible, unless we exclude logical impossibilities, such as square circles." To the amateur, however, to grant that something is possible is immediately taken as verification of a canonical report. For the sceptic, on the other hand, walking on the water is impossible; therefore Jesus did not do it. The historian accedes to neither generalization. Possibilities (and impossibilities) do not and cannot establish facts. Historians insist on looking every report in the face and judging its reliability independently of theoretical possibilities.<sup>1640</sup>

I find the idea of scientific historians studying every report of Jesus' miracles and independently judging their reliability somewhat amusing. In my experience real life historians follow Cicero's principle that 'what was incapable of happening never happened, and what was capable of happening is not a miracle'.<sup>1641</sup> In other words they begin by assuming the laws of nature were upheld in any event and then judge the ancient account of what happened accordingly.

### 3. Crossan on miracles

But where does Crossan stand on this issue? Commenting on the futility of trying to distinguish between the miracle worker and the magician he writes:

The title *magician* is not used here as a pejorative word but describes one who can make divine power present *directly through personal miracle* rather than *indirectly through communal ritual*. Despite an extremely labile continuum between the twin concepts magic renders transcendental power present concretely, physically, sensibly, tangibly, whereas ritual renders it present abstractly, ceremonially, liturgically, symbolically. ... Magic is used here as a neutral description for an authentic religious phenomenon...<sup>1642</sup>

In calling magic, and hence miracles, an authentic religious phenomenon which involves making divine or transcendental power present concretely, sensibly and tangibly it may appear as if Crossan is countenancing the 'religious' perspective in which Jesus is seen as acting as broker between God as patron and his second-order human clients, Jesus himself being the first-order client. But this simply can't be the case since Crossan defines Jesus' whole approach as countering such conservative thinking. My conviction therefore is that Crossan basically adopts an ideological perspective but in order to remain at one with the texts he prefers nonetheless to talk about the miracles in the Bible's own religious language rather than by employing scientific ideological terminology. This seems to make sense of what he says about Jesus' miracles; however, since it stands as a permanent source of confusion it will be best if we set out as clearly as we can our own view of Jesus' miracles as manifestations of his ideological power.

### 4. Criticism and My own position on miracles

Magic had always been used in the ancient world as a way of talking about peoples' ideological charismatic power, as for example in the Exodus texts in which Moses' political negotiations with Pharaoh's administrators are described in the language of

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<sup>1640</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 60-1.

<sup>1641</sup> Cicero, *De divinatione*, 2.28. See Sanders, *figure*, p. 143.

<sup>1642</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 138.

magical exchanges often involving the unleashing of plagues on the opposing community. It seems to me that Jesus' miracles are just as easily understood in these terms. Take, for example, the stilling of the storm in Mark 4.35 – 5.1. The story involves a crossing of the lake of Gennesaret that Jesus made with his disciples and tells how, exhausted, he fell asleep on the cushion at the stern of the boat, when a sudden storm blew up which threatened to sink the boat. The disciples, experienced fishermen, waken their passenger and scold him for behaving so obliviously of their plight. In their panic they clearly look to him, a peasant artisan, to deal with the situation even though it is they who have all the requisite knowledge and experience. Jesus gets up and commands the wind to cease and then asks the disciples why they demonstrate such fear and lack of faith, leaving them in open-mouthed awe.

Let us for the moment forget what we think Jesus, his disciples, or the evangelist thought, and trust our own experience which is that the laws of nature apply at all times and that it is a kind of mad wishful-thinking to believe that God is prepared to favour certain individuals by overruling the normal course of events. Given such a basis, clearly, this stilling of the storm is a story about human charisma. Its basic concern is with the enormous difference one human presence can make in a tight situation. We all experience this phenomenon on a mundane level since it is commonplace that leadership counts when it comes to team efforts. Indeed, in thinking about this story I am strongly reminded of the British accounts of the battle of Waterloo. These tell how the Duke of Wellington single-handedly kept the British lines from breaking under the fierce onslaughts of the French Imperial Guard, simply by moving around, exposing his presence to his troops and uttering brief words of encouragement. However, it would be a great mistake to leave it simply at that since there are clearly different forms of charisma, making it wrong to confuse the magnetism of the Duke of Wellington with that of Jesus. It is my thesis that charisma is controlled ideologically which means that different world-views result in different forms of motivating political will. Consequently it will be necessary to examine this story to see if it tells us anything specific about Jesus' motivating ideology.

Like the story of the Duke of Wellington most accounts of human charisma involve a conservative ideology. The leader inspires those around him or her by taking responsibility and, in exchange, demands unflinching obedience, loyalty and belief. Indeed we all of us have this conservative model of charisma so firmly fixed in our minds that we tend to take it as being the only one that exists. This makes it all too easy for conservatives to convince people that this is how Jesus behaved. But is it true? It is often wrongly supposed that Jesus was the only person in the Gospels to perform miracles. Thus Sanders vainly tries to make out that Jesus saw his miracles as signs of his proximity to God and therefore of his leadership as God's chosen spokesman or viceroy.

The truth is, however, that Crossan is much nearer to the Gospels when he maintains that Jesus expected those he healed to become healers themselves because he considered himself no patron and they no brokers.<sup>1643</sup> We see this aspect appearing in the story of the stilling of the storm itself, in Jesus' chiding of the disciples for being

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<sup>1643</sup> See p. 503 above.

afraid and lacking faith. Had he been a conservative leader he would surely have found them justified in blaming him for being irresponsibly asleep when he was needed, because such a leader has to accept responsibility whatever the circumstances. He would also have expected them to rely on him and to turn to him immediately difficulties arose and he would have found no fault with them for doing so. What we get from the story, however, is something completely different, an expectation that the disciples were capable of dealing with the matter themselves and an accusation of fear and lack of faith because in waking him up they did what any conservative would have seen as 'the right thing to do'. But this is not all. Had Jesus been a conservative charismatic who led his disciples successfully through this crisis one would have expected the story to tell of a magnificent victory against the elements brought about by collective valour operating under inspired leadership. But this is far from being what we actually get, which is merely a word of command followed by silence and stillness. To me this tells of something totally at variance with conservative charismatic leadership. It speaks of a simple demonstration of what it means to be unafraid and to have faith which instantly communicates to others, enabling them to do what they had always been capable of but which they had been prevented from doing by something in themselves. The sheer wakened presence of this extraordinary man who consistently operates without make-believe or pretence enables the disciples to do the right thing and, before they know it, the storm is successfully weathered, as indeed it would have been without waking Jesus if they too had had the right attitude.

I offer this reading of the miracle of the stilling of the storm as an indication of the perspective with which I approach Jesus' miracle-making, seeing the phenomenon as a manifestation of his charisma as a servant of the god-of-the-marginals. Given this general understanding I find it necessary to question Crossan's claim that the miracles should be seen as forming part of Jesus' strategy to rebuild society from the bottom up. That, as I have already indicated, would be to see Jesus as a revisionist, as someone who believed it was possible for humans to build the Kingdom of God all by themselves. That said, I find little to make me think Crossan's understanding of the miracle stories themselves is deficient. It is simply that his way of describing them in religious language can easily lead to confusion.<sup>1644</sup>

### *General Summery*

That concludes my defence of the evangelists' 'revolutionary' sketch of the historical Jesus. Some may feel disappointed that I have not fleshed it out to produce a full scale portrait, as others have done with their conservative, liberal and radical alternatives. I have to say that I had seen myself as doing this but, when the moment came, two considerations held me back. First was my desire to remain truthful to my methodology, in which I purposefully restrict myself to what others identify in the texts so as to be able to counter any claim that I discover in the Bible simply what I want to find. Second was my belief that it was not for me to produce a full scale portrait of the historical Jesus since the evangelists have already done this and, unlike so many modern historians, I feel perfectly happy with what they achieved, believing it quite

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<sup>1644</sup> I am very aware that I have not adequately examined the subject of Jesus' miracles but when you are dealing with the whole Bible, as I am doing, every now and then something has to give!

unnecessary, and indeed counter-productive, to try to discover something better behind their backs. My job, as it seems to me, has been simply to highlight once again the basic ‘revolutionary’ pattern they were all (bar Thomas) working with and to defend this against the alternative, revisionist, sketches that scholars have produced, in a vain attempt, as I see it, to make Jesus less threatening to themselves and their interests. This I hope I have now satisfactorily done.

Throughout this book we have been working on the premise that a genuine portrait of the historical Jesus has to be fully biblical, showing Jesus as operating ideologically within the Bible’s terms and not as introducing something novel. It was as a result of this conviction that we decided to plunge into the Jewish Bible to see if we could bracket out all modern conservative, liberal, radical and fundamentalist views as to what it was basically about and, by using Jesus’ remarkably idiosyncratic, reactive strategy as a guide, determine for ourselves what constituted the biblical ideology. What we discovered was the god-of-the-marginals, the Hebrew ‘revolution’ and the story of the ongoing ‘revolution’/revisionism struggle. In this present chapter we have taken this god-of-the-marginals ideology, and the outline sketch of Jesus that his espousal of such an ideology implies, and pitted this against a number of rival, twentieth-century portraits of the historical Jesus drawn by the use of conservative, liberal and radical patterns. In doing this my objective has been to demonstrate the adequacy of the god-of-the-marginals template in making sense of the material found in the Gospels, and the inadequacy of the other ideological templates in doing likewise. In this way I have sought to prove my thesis that the evangelists were in fact ‘revolutionaries’ drawing portraits of their ‘revolutionary’ hero. One question, however, remains. Even if it is granted that the writers of the intra-canonical Gospels intended to draw ‘revolutionary’ portraits of Jesus, were they justified in doing so given Thomas’s altogether un-‘revolutionary’ rival composition? In this regard I am reminded of the following stricture delivered by Crossan against his fellow twentieth century biblical historians:

I do not think, after two hundred years of experimentation, that there is any way, acceptable in public discourse or scholarly debate, by which you can go directly into the great mound of the Jesus tradition and separate out the historical Jesus layer from all later strata. You can ... do so if you have already decided who Jesus was. That works, of course, but it is apologetics rather than research.<sup>1645</sup>

In deciding to view Jesus as a ‘revolutionary’ have I too been guilty of doing apologetics rather than history? We shall deal with this question and the whole topic of historicity in the next chapter.

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<sup>1645</sup> Crossan, *Birth*, p. 149.



## Chapter 22

### The Question of Historicity

Having established the credentials of the ‘revolutionary’ portrait of the historical Jesus by measuring its adequacy in making sense of the Gospel texts over against its rivals’ it now becomes necessary to weigh its historicity. One of the received notions of modern biblical scholarship is that it is not safe to base arguments concerning the historical Jesus on John’s Gospel. Thus Bob Funk:

John presents a very different sketch of Jesus than the synoptics. In the synoptics Jesus speaks frequently in parables and aphorisms; in John, Jesus is a lecturer given to extended monologues. In the synoptics Jesus speaks about God’s domain; in John, Jesus speaks mostly about himself and his relations to his father. ... In the Gospel of John, Jesus is a self-conscious messiah rather than a self-effacing sage. ... Although John preserves the illusion of combining a real Jesus with the mythic Christ, the human side of Jesus is in fact diminished. For all these reasons, the current quest for the historical Jesus makes little use of the heavily interpreted data found in the Gospel of John.<sup>1646</sup>

But is this prejudice well founded? When it comes to verifying assertions about the past the problem of historicity is the problem of the ‘it’ in the question: ‘Did it actually happen?’ Because this is the case we cannot answer the historicity question concerning an assertion that something in the past happened before we have determined the character of the something. Did *what* actually happen? In other words you can’t just take a text and coldly apply a series of historicity tests to it. You have first to understand the intention of the writer, for otherwise you may well find yourself applying tests which are inappropriate. Take, for example, the story of Alfred and the cakes. The ‘it’ in this case could either be taken as an assertion that King Alfred was once severely taken to task by an old peasant woman for allowing her cakes to burn, or it could be taken as a general assertion in story-form of the king’s woeful predicament immediately after his initial string of defeats at the hands of the Danes, and his focused determination to find a way through it. It would be perfectly appropriate to test the historicity of the story in either case but the types of questions asked would be different in each instance.

There is however, a prior question which has to be asked and answered when dealing with assertions about the past, especially where so-called religious texts are concerned, and that is as to whether questions about historicity can even properly be raised at all. Let me give you an example to show you what I mean. Here is a short article taken from the Guardian newspaper about a recent incident which you might possibly have heard about:

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<sup>1646</sup> Funk, *Honest* p. 127.

## Court asked to decide: did Christ exist?

Italian lawyer Severo Bruno does not usually have such important clients but yesterday he found himself representing Jesus Christ in court in a small town north of Rome. The central claim is whether Christ existed.

Atheist Luigi Cascioli, 72, says for 2,000 years the Catholic church has been deceiving people by perpetuating the myth that Christ was a real person. He has filed a criminal lawsuit against his old school friend Father Enrico Righi, the parish priest in Bagnoregio, chosen because the 76-year-old cleric has written about the existence of Christ in his parish bulletin.

Mr Cascioli asserts the priest has committed fraud by "abusing popular belief" and that the church has been gaining financially by passing off John of Gamala, the son of Judas from Gamala, as Christ.

Yesterday the case went to court for a closed-door hearing. Judge Gaetano Mautone has yet to decide if the case will continue. Afterwards Mr Bruno said he was confident there was no case to answer. "Don Righi is innocent because he said and wrote what he has the duty to say and write," he said. "When Don Righi spoke about Christ's humanity, he was affirming that he needs to be considered as a man. What his name is, where he comes from or who his parents are is secondary.

Mr Cascioli's lawyer, Mauro Fonzo, said the matter warranted discussion. "When somebody states a wrong fact, abusing the ignorance of people, and gains from that, then that is one of the gravest crimes," Mr Cascioli said. If the case is allowed to continue, the court will appoint experts to review the historical data, with the gospels as part of evidence submitted.<sup>1647</sup>

As the atheist plaintiff Luigi views the matter the 'it' in 'did it actually happen' is the virgin birth. Luigi is convinced that a proper scientific examination of the evidence will show that it didn't and that the 'virgin birth' is simply a smokescreen, used to hide the Catholic fraud concerning the divinity of Jesus, which was designed to part gullible folk from their money. This 'it' of the virgin birth is therefore an asserted historical fact which Judge Mautone is *quite competent* to pronounce on after he has done the necessary research in which appropriate historicity tests are applied. As far as Don Righi, Luigi's former school friend, the priest, is concerned, the 'it' in 'did it actually happen' is something different: the incarnation, an idea present in his assertion that Christ as the second person of the Trinity has to be considered as a man, whatever this man's name was and whoever his parents were. This is a question which Mautone in his professional capacity is *incompetent* to judge since it is essentially a religious issue and as such impervious to scientific historicity testing, being only amenable to religious faith. All this would seem to indicate that while it is *possibly* appropriate to ask historicity questions about the virgin birth (depending, of course, on the intention of the evangelists in putting forward this concept or happening) it is quite inappropriate to ask historicity questions about the incarnation. As for the Guardian's headline 'Did Christ Exist' the 'it' in 'did it actually happen' is simply Christ. Did Christ happen? This assertion has the appearance of being neutral in that it can be taken either way. This, of course, adds to the humour of a situation in which lawyers are now being asked to adjudicate in what is basically a spat between historians and theologians.<sup>1648</sup>

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<sup>1647</sup> The Guardian Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2006.

<sup>1648</sup> In this regard I can't help thinking of the recent case between the historian David Irving and Deborah Lipstadt who had published a book denouncing him as a holocaust denier. Here, you will remember, Judge Grey found against an historian on historical grounds!



All of this raises the question whether New Testament writers were concerned with historicity. This problem had already been highlighted in the middle of the nineteenth century by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard:

When Christianity is viewed from the standpoint of its historical documentation, it becomes necessary to secure an entirely trustworthy account of what the Christian doctrine really is. If the inquirer were infinitely interested in behalf of his relationship to the doctrine he would at once despair; for nothing is more readily evident than that the greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an *approximation*. And an approximation, when viewed as a basis for an eternal happiness, is wholly inadequate ...

[As far as history is concerned] it is necessary for the scholar to secure the maximum of dependability; for me, on the contrary, it is of importance not to make a display of learning, or to betray the fact that I have none. In the interest of my problem it is more important to have it understood and remembered that even with the most stupendous learning and persistence in research, and even if all the brains of all the critics were concentrated in one, it would still be impossible to obtain anything more than an approximation; and that an approximation is essentially incommensurable with an infinite personal interest in an eternal happiness.<sup>1649</sup>

Like Don Righi, Kierkegaard apparently believed that, when it came to investigating Christianity, questions of historicity were inappropriate. For he claimed that historians carrying out their professional functions were incapable of substantiating the 'it' with which he as a Christian was concerned and which he believed the New Testament was designed to furnish. This 'it' he described as Christianity or Christian doctrine. This 'it' he saw as being acquired only by religious faith and this 'it' he believed was the only thing capable of bring a person eternal happiness. However, the people Kierkegaard was criticizing in the mid-nineteenth century were not in fact historians but rather theologians writing histories. He poked a lot of fun at such people but this does not mean that he underrated scholarly achievement as such:

One sometimes hears uneducated or half educated people, or conceited geniuses, speak with contempt of the labour of criticism devoted to ancient writings; one hears them foolishly deride the learned scholar's careful scrutiny of the most insignificant detail, which is precisely the glory of the scholar, namely, that he considers nothing insignificant that bears upon his science. ... the present author yields to none in profound respect for that which science consecrates. ... When a philologist prepares an edition of one of Cicero's writings, for example, and performs his task with great acumen, the scholarly apparatus held in beautiful subservience to the control of the spirit; when his ingenuity and his familiarity with the period, gained through formidable industry, combine with his instinct for discovery to overcome obstacles, preparing a clear way for the meaning through the obscure maze of the readings, and so forth-then it is quite safe to yield oneself in whole-hearted admiration. For when he has finished, nothing follows except the wholly admirable result that an ancient writing has now through his skill and competence received its most accurate possible form. But by no means that I should now base my eternal happiness on this work; for in relation to my eternal happiness, his astonishing acumen seems, I must admit, inadequate. Aye, I confess that my admiration for him would be not glad but despondent, if I thought he had any such thing in mind. But this is precisely how the learned theologian goes to work ...<sup>1650</sup>

Clearly Kierkegaard was not against historians working as historians. Rather he was against theologians seeing their task as that of being historians. This would seem to suggest that he would have been happy with our present day consensus which is that theology and history should not be mixed; that there is nothing wrong with being a theologian or with being an historian just so long as you do not confuse these endeavors.

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<sup>1649</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Scientific Postscript*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) pp. 25-6.

<sup>1650</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, p. 27.

This, of course, takes us back to the arguments which took place in Old Testament scholarship a few years ago, in which a generation of basically atheist historians (so-called minimalists) accused a generation of basically Christian historians (so-called maximalists) of falsifying the historical records because of an unscholarly attachment to the biblical record as history. It is commonly believed that the result of this controversy has been to highlight yet again the received wisdom that faith no longer has any place in historical discussion. In other words you can have a conversation about the Old Testament in terms of faith or you can have a conversation about it in terms of history but the conversations should be kept entirely separate.<sup>1651</sup>

Kierkegaard was clearly writing as one interested in participating in the ‘faith and theology’ conversation when, in the middle of the nineteenth century, he attacked theologians for ‘playing at being historians’. Albert Schweitzer, for his part, was clearly interested in participating in the alternative ‘history as science’ conversation, when at the end of that century he wrote *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, a work in which he conclusively demonstrated that the ‘lives of Jesus’ constructed by 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians revealed more about the diversity of theological opinion at that time than they did about Jesus himself. The 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘quest for the historical Jesus’, which Schweitzer’s work set in motion, was based on the conviction that only objective historical scholarship could hope to isolate the real figure of Jesus. As I remarked on the first page of this book, looking back from the vantage point of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can now clearly see that the work of historical scholarship over the last hundred years has produced an equally wide variety of conflicting results. It is this, of course, which imparts a delicious element of humour to the Don Righi affair in which Luigi Cascioli, now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, seeks to involve yet another profession – lawyers – in this 2,000-year-old dispute.

It seems to me that our modern understanding concerning the incompatibility of theology and history, far from clarifying the situation has left us a terrible mess from which it is now difficult to extricate ourselves. For we have one discipline, biblical theology, from which all real objectivity has been deliberately removed, leaving us at the mercy of religious whim, and another discipline, biblical history, in which objectivity has provided us with nothing but one ideological distortion after another: post-modernism’s ‘death of history’ syndrome. I have to admit that when I was a student in the nineteen-sixties I found Kierkegaard’s ideas captivating. However, having lived my life assuming there are two conversations, one involving only believers and the other involving everyone who is prepared to leave their theological weaponry at the door, I have come to the conclusion that the whole thing is ridiculous. Manifestly we all live in one reality which makes no distinction between believers and non-believers. Of course nothing can stop people from playing exclusivist ‘believers’ games on private pitches of their own devising but surely no one can be under any real illusion that doing so is anything other than a bit of fantasizing which inevitably makes those who play such games an irrelevance. I have to state therefore that, as far as I am concerned, *when it comes to the Bible and reality there is only one conversation and it involves everyone*. I say this, however, knowing perfectly well that I shall be largely ignored because the two-conversation scenario suits people so well *in getting them off*

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<sup>1651</sup> See above p. 369.

*the biblical hook*. We are all aware that Christians find it advantageous because it gives them a protected area in which to play out their theological games free from fear of attack by atheist historians. But the truth is that atheist historians also find it advantageous since it gives them a convenient dust-bin labelled ‘religious trash’ into which they can throw everything they don’t know how to deal with or find inconvenient. In this way they habitually dispose of the only thing in the Bible which makes it still worth reading two or three thousand years after it was written: its god-of-the-marginals ideology.

But how can I claim that there is only ‘one conversation’, given everything Kierkegaard wrote? Kierkegaard’s arguments depend on seeing Christianity as a *religion*, Christian faith as a *religious* faith, and the reward that Christian faith brings as a *religious* state; namely eternal happiness. If one grants that Christianity is a religion enjoining religious belief and promising religious rewards then his arguments are clearly water-tight. It is obvious that religion operates in an existential domain where historical proof and disproof – like all kinds of objective scientific certainty or approximations to certainty – are meaningless, for religion pertains to belief not to certainty or approximations to certainty. But should one grant such a premise? Not for a single moment, I believe. For, according to my reading of the Bible, discipleship is not presented in the New Testament as a religion but rather as what we would call an ideological conviction – what they called ‘a way’. And again, according to the Gospels faith is not presented as a religious conviction since Jesus claimed that a number of 100% pagan Gentiles demonstrated it and most 100% religious Jews didn’t. And, again, the reward coming to those who follow this so-called way is never described in the Bible as eternal happiness,<sup>1652</sup> perhaps because it seems to have included such things as taking up your cross and losing your life. It is, however, quite often maintained that discipleship will be rewarded by eternal life but all this seems to indicate is that people have to go forward in the belief that such conduct will be vindicated ... in what manner remains yet to be seen.

So it seems to me that no one in all honesty can avoid historicity questions by playing Kierkegaard’s ‘religion’ card. For if it could be proved that Jesus was indeed a charlatan, who started a rumour that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in order to dupe people into believing that he was the son of God, then Paul’s hope that Christ was risen, on which he was prepared to base everything, would indeed have been vain. So, faced with the Bible and its assertions about things we have not ourselves seen and experienced, we are obliged to ask historicity questions.<sup>1653</sup> But first of all we must determine what the texts assert. Was it a straightforward ‘did he burn the cakes?’ kind of issue or was it something rather more subtle and important?

Negatively we have claimed the Bible is unconcerned with private religious matters, of interest only to those having a particular religious belief. Positively we have claimed it is involved in an ideological conversation embracing everyone not suffering from some dehumanising mental disorder. Further to this we have also established the ideology

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<sup>1652</sup> It seems to me that this idea fits better with the constitution of the U.S.A. than it does with the Bible!

<sup>1653</sup> Just as people living in Jesus’ day would have been obliged not to take for granted the reliability of informants concerning incidents they had not themselves witnessed.

which the Bible proposes and I will summarise it once again since such an important rediscovery cannot be repeated too often:

In the Old Testament the biblical ideology is presented in the form of Yahweh as god of the Hebrews. I call it therefore the god-of-the-marginals ideology. As I see it, in this great document we do not find ourselves face to face with one of civilisation's gods. We are not confronted, for example, by the aristocrats' god of protection offered in return for loyalty and radical obedience, nor are we confronted by the revolutionary, bourgeois god of liberty, equality and fraternity, nor by the revolutionary proletarian god of the classless society. Here, on the contrary we are faced with the 'revolutionary' god of the marginals, which is to say the god of those who, for one reason or another, find themselves trashed. This god of the marginals enjoins radical solidarity with the outcasts, the understanding being that only such people have the point of view necessary to recognise civilisation's hypocrisy for what it is and the motivation to do something about it. The promise is that if the marginals do the only thing they are capable of doing, given the fact that they have no political strength, by summoning the courage to stand up for themselves and cry out and denounce their treatment at civilisation's hands, this god, their god, will vindicate them. Thus civilization's hypocrisy will at last be exposed and civilisation itself eventually shamed into changing its ways, bringing about a state of universal salvation spoken about as the Kingdom of God. This is a *reactive* strategy built on developing strength through weakness and not a *proactive* strategy developing straightforward political strength. The Old Testament never supposes that this process will be easy or painless. Civilisation will naturally react badly in the first instance, hardening its heart. Consequently the rewards for disciples will be mixed. For though they can go forward in the assurance that they will in the end be vindicated they will be obliged in the meantime to accept suffering as their lot. In order to enable this process of universal transformation through shaming to take place, the community of marginals, once rescued from Egypt, is given a land within which to set up a community based on the principle of radical solidarity, in which the phenomenon of marginalization will have no place. In this way Israel will become 'the light to lighten the Gentiles' and, by mounting such a demonstration, will enable Yahweh to transform civilisation by himself softening human hearts.

That is the picture given by the Old Testament always allowing, of course, for its reflection of revisionism as well. Our thesis is that the Gospel writers present Jesus as setting out to fulfil this strategy in his lifetime, calling on his fellow countrymen to join with him in performing as a 'revolutionary' community, living together in radical solidarity. Given this basic scenario the historicity question as regards the Gospels would appear to be this:

Did Jesus (with or without his followers) succeed in fulfilling the Law and the prophets; performing as the light to lighten the Gentiles by living a life of radical solidarity, thus setting in motion the process of shaming and transforming civilisation? Or did he fail in this endeavour? Or was the endeavour ill-conceived? Or did the early Church simply invent the story for its own purposes?

Everyone is, of course, perfectly at liberty to dispute my accounts of the intentions of the writers of the biblical texts and I am well aware that at the moment few, perhaps, will follow me here. However, what this exercise demonstrates (whether you take my descriptions on board or not) is

1. That historicity questions only become pertinent *after* one has established the true intentions of a biblical author who appears to be writing historically about the past.
2. That it is *only when these intentions have become clear* that one can establish what sort of historicity questions are applicable to the particular text.

*The fact is that, for the most part, twentieth century New Testament scholarship did not obey this general rule.* For instead of trying to discover from the Gospels what the evangelists claimed Jesus was up to and then testing this claim for historicity by asking appropriate questions, twentieth century scholars almost universally ignored what the evangelists claimed and instead employed historicity techniques from the very beginning, to try and establish behind the backs of the evangelists what Jesus had been up to. Here, for example, is Funk's description of the scholars' methodology in eight easy stages:

- The first function of historical inquiry is to isolate and establish the particular.
- The second function of historians is to group the particulars into arrays or constellations.
- A third function is to assemble comparative evidence.
- A fourth aspect of the historical task consists in arranging arrays in strata.
- A fifth function of historical investigation is to study the literary vehicles of transmission. (form criticism)
- A sixth aspect of the task of the historian is to bring a broader perspective to a particular task. (by establishing trends current at the time)
- A seventh function of the historian is to analyze how the role of the observer (the historian) affects the observed.
- Finally, we will also need to take note both of how the prior interests of the scholars influence the kind of range of data selected and of how that selection nuances the reconstruction.<sup>1654</sup>

Why did the scholars proceed in this way? Quite simply because it appeared to them that all of the evangelists were essentially making *the same theological assertion* in their works (*that Jesus was the son of God who had become incarnate*) and, for historians, such a claim put the evangelists' work in the wrong conversation! Consequently, in order to be able do their historical research twentieth century historians of every political hue (including Sanders, Funk, Borg and Crossan) felt obliged to work behind the evangelists' backs, using their Gospels (not John's, of course, which they considered virtually useless) simply as quarries from which they could hope to extract a certain amount of 'genuine historical data'.

But, of course, given what we have now come to understand about the Bible's god-of-the-marginals standpoint, the basic premise of twentieth century historians turns out to have been entirely wrong. *For the truth is THE EVANGELISTS WERE NOT MAKING THEOLOGICAL ASSERTIONS IN THE WRONG CONVERSATION and twentieth century historians, as professionals, should have realised this.* Like all of the 'revolutionary' biblical writers the evangelists only knew of one conversation, which was essentially ideological not religious. When they claimed that Jesus was Yahweh's

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<sup>1654</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 60-62.

son they were not making a fatuous, disembodied claim based on information which they believed was revealed to them privately from on high. They were simply saying that as far as they were concerned you could not put a cigarette paper between the ideology represented by the spirit of the Mosaic Law and defended against the revisionists by the prophets, and the ideology that Jesus actually performed in his life, a point clearly expressed in John 5. 19 – 47. In other words what they were saying was that Jesus in a life of radical solidarity demonstrated and fulfilled the Law and the prophets, thus exposing and shaming civilisation. As I see it *that historical demonstration and its results constitute material which can, at least in principle, be verified by any competent historian who knows what the Law and the prophets entailed as a 'revolutionary' ideology*. So why aren't New Testament historians doing their job and justifying the money spent on their salaries by testing the evidence to see if the evangelists had a case? You tell me! But whatever conclusion you come to, don't expect me to go along with the ridiculous assertions that the evangelists were involved in a religious conversation and that John's Gospel contains less historicity than the others. As I see it, all a person does in making such foolish points is to demonstrate an unwillingness to deal with the subject matter the evangelists present us with. Of course, John's Gospel has to be treated differently from the Synoptics since he clearly had a very different approach when it came to presenting the common subject matter: Jesus as the god of the marginals' true servant. But John's alternative *presentation* is not basically the issue when it comes to the question of historicity, whereas his *subject matter* is and I can find no ideological difference whatsoever between Jesus as the true servant of the god of the marginals in John, and Jesus as the true servant of the god of the marginals in the other three gospels. As I see it, *viewed ideologically* all four Gospels present *an identical portrait of the historical Jesus*, which means that all of them stand together as historically justified, or otherwise, in what they advance.

E. P. Sanders appears to agree that John himself at least would have considered his Gospel to be essentially true. However, he clearly disagrees with me that in its essentials John's Gospel contains as much historicity as that found in the synoptics:

... the last 150 or so years scholars have had to choose. They have almost unanimously, and I think entirely correctly, concluded that the teaching of the historical Jesus is to be sought in the synoptic gospels and that John represents an advanced theological development, in which meditations on the person and work of Christ are presented in the first person, as if Jesus said them. The author of the Gospel of John would be the first to point out that this does not mean that the discourses that he attributed to Jesus are 'untrue'; he would not have agreed that historical accuracy and truth are synonymous, any more than he thought that a true vine was a vegetable. In John's view, something that is accurate on the surface is by definition not 'true'. Real water quenches thirst for ever, a property that the wet stuff that appears to be water does not have (John 4.13).

Sanders' assertion that John did not consider a *true* vine a vegetable or the wet stuff we call water as *real* water is really quite bizarre and no help at all in understanding the amount of historicity contained in the fourth Gospel. I am pretty certain John was just as aware as we are of the need to hand on the truth concerning past events (especially *these* events) and of the very great difficulty, yet responsibility, in doing this adequately. The fact is that if one is to judge how successful he was in this department one has to take into account his own methodology in which, clearly, what we rather naively call 'historical accuracy' counted for little, just as little indeed as it did in the alternative methodology adopted by the other three evangelists. If most modern

scholars have come to the conclusion that the synoptics contain more historicity than John's gospel it is only because they delude themselves (purposefully or otherwise) as to what historicity is all about. Historicity is much closer to what John would have called the truth than it is to what Sanders calls historical accuracy, something which makes me profoundly thankful it was not left to modern scholars to write the Gospels. For if that had been the case none of us would have been afforded even a glimpse of the historical Jesus, of that you can be quite sure. As I see it this whole twentieth century charade of searching after historical accuracy is nothing but the latest in a long line of scams employed by biblical scribes in order to avoid having to deal with the disagreeable truth which the Bible seeks to expose.<sup>1655</sup> As ever it is a very clever scam since it not only avoids dealing with the import of the Bible by pretending to put the work itself centre stage but it also guarantees that whatever does come up will never be anything to do with the god of the marginals. And if you think that I am simply being churlish then I encourage you to go and read their books to see if you can discover anything of the god of the marginals in what they write because I certainly can't.

Having turned our back on the bogus question of historical accuracy, we must now confront the real historicity questions which the Gospels pose. Did Jesus, with or without his followers, succeed in fulfilling the Law and the prophets: performing as the light to lighten the Gentiles by living a life of radical solidarity and thus setting in motion the process of shaming and transforming civilisation? Or did he fail in this endeavour? Or was the endeavour ill conceived? Or did the scribes of the early Church simply invent the whole story for their own purposes?

The last of these questions is easy to answer. It is out of the question that early Church scribes invented the story. The fact that biblical scholars have spent so much time and ingenuity in trying to cover up the evangelists' portrait of the historical Jesus is in itself more than adequate testimony to the fact that their kind would never, ever, have invented such a thing. Indeed it is just as certain that early Christian scholars did not invent the Jesus of the Gospels as it is that early Jewish scholars (P and his friends) did not invent the story of the Hebrew 'revolution'. I know scholars themselves sometimes like to pretend this might have been the case but, knowing them, I can tell you they would be the last people on earth to do anything so foolish! Like the Hebrew 'revolution' the Jesus of the Gospels is clearly the product (if that is the right word) of a 'revolutionary' marginal hope, and as such something so rare as to be unimaginable *even by marginals themselves*.

The first question, too, is relatively easy to answer. Every indication we have is that Jesus did indeed succeed in living a life of radical solidarity, though it appears he ended up carrying it through alone ... a fact which in itself is not the least bit surprising when you consider what it entailed. Whether in doing so he succeeded in setting in motion the process of shaming and transforming civilisation is less easy to answer and will entail understanding what the early Church spoke about as the resurrection. To this we will shortly turn in our final chapter.

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<sup>1655</sup> It should be clearly understood that my quarrel with twentieth century historians is not that they ask questions about historical accuracy – something I find perfectly legitimate – but that they believe that the way to discovering historicity is through pursuing historical accuracy behind the evangelists' backs.

However, before we do so let us return to Crossan and his contention that in ignoring questions of methodology twentieth century biblical historians have been guilty of doing apologetics rather than history.

I have been publishing on the historical Jesus since 1969. In all that time, I have worked on two fronts simultaneously, studying both materials and methods. On materials, I have studied parables and aphorisms as well as intracanonical and extracanonical gospels. On methods, I started with historical criticism, next incorporated literary criticism, and finally added macrosociological criticism to form an integrated interdisciplinary model. When I finally published *The Historical Jesus* in 1991, I intended not just to present another reconstruction of Jesus but to inaugurate a full-blown debate on methodology among my peers. I spent no time debating other views of Jesus because, without methodology, method, and inventory, one view was as valid as the other. If you can pick what you want, you will get what you need. There still is no serious discussion of methodology in historical Jesus research, and the same applies to the birth of Christianity. That does not make me very proud of myself and my scholarly colleagues.<sup>1656</sup>

It is important to understand that Crossan is not arguing that whereas his colleagues construct portraits of the historical Jesus, using various ideological armatures, his offering has no need of such a support. His argument is rather that the crucial choice of the right ideological armature has to be justified methodologically. I have no problem whatsoever with this contention *at least as I have just stated it*. Indeed I applaud Crossan's work both in bringing this issue to the forefront of debate and in attempting to construct an adequate methodology to deal with it. Having said that, I note that he actually frames the methodology question in such a way as to make it clear that, like his colleagues he too sees the issue basically in terms of finding the historical Jesus *behind the evangelists' backs*<sup>1657</sup> and here I am seriously obliged to take issue with him. I continue to maintain that such an exercise is futile since I am more than adequately persuaded that a god-of-the-marginals ideology is not something which any scholar has a hope of ever discovering by means of any conceivable methodology which seeks to go behind the evangelists' backs, or, worse still, behind the back of the Hebrew 'revolutionary' tradition; and I now put forward Crossan's own excellent work, which far outshines anything so far produced in this department, as proof of this proposition. For the simple fact is that Crossan's conclusion that Jesus was a pacific peasant revolutionary who was concerned to build up society from the grass-roots on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism – interesting as it undoubtedly is – shows no inkling whatsoever of the Hebrew's god-of-the-marginals ideology. There is no hint here of the Hebrew strategy of employing the marginals' peculiar power of demonstration and exposure to shame civilization's hypocritical use of coercive power to defend privilege. And there is no recognition here of the Hebrew's strange hope against hope that Yahweh would vindicate them by inexplicably softening civilisation hearts. Does this mean that I reject all of Crossan's painstaking analytical work? On no account, since I find it confirms the Hebrew god-of-the-marginals ideological position far better than it does Crossan's own alternative.

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<sup>1656</sup> Crossan, *Birth*, p. 139.

<sup>1657</sup> See the quote on p. 492 above.



## Chapter 23

### Resurrection

In our study of the resurrection we shall once again be tracking our four chosen historians: E. P. Sanders, Robert Funk, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan. We will begin by looking at the findings of Borg and Funk.

*The Resurrection as seen by Marcus Borg from a liberal point of view.*

One interesting fact about Borg's work *Meeting Jesus for the First Time* is that it contributes nothing of substance to the debate about the resurrection. When it comes to dealing with what remains to be said after Jesus' death Borg disappears into a scholarly discussion of the various images of Jesus found in the gospel texts as these are patterned by what he calls the three great macro-stories of scripture (The Exodus, Exile and Return, and Priestly stories). I do not believe that to follow him in this complex endeavour, in which he attempts, once again, to justify his liberal anti-conservative position, is a useful exercise. However, there is something perhaps worth noting. At one point he touches on the Gospels' 'light'-theme which, we ourselves have argued, together with the parables constitutes the principle axis on which the evangelists constructed their 'revolutionary' understanding of Jesus as a reactive figure who, by his way of living, exposes and shames the world. Borg, to my mind, flagrantly misrepresents these texts to make it seem as if they portray Jesus as a proactive figure who, supposedly, reveals what God is like:

... the emphasis is upon Jesus as 'the light' who beckons us home from the darkness of exile. ... There is a power that wills our liberation, a light shining in the darkness that invites us home from exile, a compassionate presence that accepts us just as we are, though we may not know that yet.<sup>1658</sup>

As far as I am aware there is no reference in the Bible, in either Testament, to a proactive light which guides people anywhere, let alone home from exile. The whole construct, along with Borg's 'compassionate presence' which supposedly 'accepts us just as we are', looks to me like pure liberal eyewash which effectively obscures what the texts are actually driving at.

That Borg's avoidance of the resurrection is not accidental is confirmed by his earlier work *Jesus a New Vision*, where in the final chapter, after having dealt with the crucifixion, he discusses Jesus' significance for our time without touching on the idea. Instead he concentrates on his own treasured, liberal themes of revelation<sup>1659</sup>, discipleship<sup>1660</sup> and challenge.<sup>1661</sup> It is true, of course, that in his later work *Jesus at 2000* he does at the end of his essay entitled 'Easter: The Foundational Experience',

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<sup>1658</sup> Borg, 2000, pp. 131-2.

<sup>1659</sup> Jesus as the individual genius who reveals the liberal face of God.

<sup>1660</sup> Discipleship as living in the spirit compassionately, openly and freely without conservative securities, Jesus being the model.

<sup>1661</sup> Challenge being the anti-conservative, anti conventional wisdom watchword.

mention other scholars' comments on the resurrection stories. However, all he says off his own bat – before hurriedly returning to his favoured 'pre-Easter Jesus' theme<sup>1662</sup> – is that resurrection is not about the disappearance of a body and an empty tomb but rather an entry into a different kind of existence – a liberal one no doubt! I say this because, characteristically, Borg does not elucidate.<sup>1663</sup> My suspicion is that, like the miracles, the resurrection is not something he finds he can make much of.

*The Resurrection as seen by Robert Funk from a liberal point of view.*

Funk has a lot more to say about the resurrection than Borg. He examines both where the idea itself came from within the Jewish tradition and the actual resurrection stories themselves. He notes the difficulty of reconciling the various reports and concludes that this indicates the stories themselves are late and unreliable.<sup>1664</sup> He believes he can trace two separate resurrection traditions. In the first, found in the canonical Gospels, he detects a tendency as time went by for the appearances to become increasingly 'more physical and tangible and to be linked to the empty-tomb story'.<sup>1665</sup> He believes this movement finally became fixed as an orthodox position in the struggles with gnosticism at the end of the first century.<sup>1666</sup> In the rival Pauline tradition Funk finds that 'the appearances tend to be more ethereal, linked less and less to the notion of the resuscitation of a corpse.'<sup>1667</sup> And he clearly believes that, if anything, the Pauline tradition is the more reliable if one can speak at all of the resurrection in such terms.

When it comes to explaining the resurrection stories themselves Funk has two suggestions, both of which envisage them as creations of the early Church produced for its own convenience. His examination of the history of the idea of resurrection in Jewish tradition leads him to conclude that for first century Palestinians resurrection represented a rectification of the injustices perpetrated in this life; resurrection as vindication being seen in terms of due recompense – the reward for a good life in Deuteronomistic terms, though here being offered beyond the grave.<sup>1668</sup> On this basis

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<sup>1662</sup> 'As I conclude, I want to return to the pre-Easter Jesus, to the Jesus who was born 2,000 years ago.' Borg, *2000*, p. 17.

<sup>1663</sup> '... in my judgment Easter need not involve an empty-tomb or anything happening to the physical body of Jesus. ... Resuscitation intrinsically involves something happening to a corpse, but resurrection in a first-century Jewish and early Christian context need not. Resurrection means entry into a different kind of existence, not resumption of a previous existence.' Borg, *2000*, p. 16.

<sup>1664</sup> 'The difficulties in reconciling the various reports of appearances with each other arouse suspicion that the lists and reports were compiled long after the fact and are therefore not reliable.' Funk, *Honest*, p. 267.

<sup>1665</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 268.

<sup>1666</sup> 'James M. Robinson points out that the earliest appearances of the risen Jesus were visualized as luminous apparitions. Both Paul and Luke make this evident. The move to replace a disembodied, supernatural figure with a more tangible, material bodily resurrection – the resuscitation of a corpse – was actually triggered by a conflict with gnostic views. Toward the close of the first century, the gnostics began to claim their own view of the resurrection as normative – the appearances as a blinding light accompanied by some revelatory communication.' Funk, *Honest*, p. 269.

<sup>1667</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 268.

<sup>1668</sup> 'The resurrection is the extension of the Deuteronomic paradigm beyond the grave: since the righteous are not being rewarded and the wicked are not being punished in this life, reward and punishment will be handed out after death.' Funk, *Honest*, p. 275-6.

Funk argues that resurrection would have been ‘a particularly congenial idea for the new Jesus movement’:

This movement had a saviour figure who was not treated as the messiah should have been treated. Jesus' fate seemed to match the fate of many, if not most, of Jesus' early followers, who were poor peasants. There was a disjunction between their experience of life and their belief that God would vindicate them. Jesus' resurrection represented vindication for the persecuted and wrongfully executed man Jesus. It was compensation for his suffering. It also positioned Jesus as a cosmic judge who would return at the end of the age and preside over the resurrection of the righteous to eternal life and the resurrection of the wicked to eternal punishment. The resurrection of Jesus was thus understood as a down payment on a future general resurrection. Justice would eventually be handed out to everyone according to merit. Resurrection was the centrepiece of a comprehensive compensatory scheme.<sup>1669</sup>

Funk points out that this idea of a recompense in the after life finds little justification in the authentic teaching of Jesus:

There is not much supporting evidence and a great deal of contradictory evidence in the authentic teachings of Jesus for this doctrine. Jesus seems to have repeatedly suggested that only the undeserving would be eligible to enter God's domain; that those who thought they should be first would in fact be last. Insiders would be out and outsiders in. The reversal of first and last was for him the fundamental model.<sup>1670</sup>

I am happy to accept Funk's finding that ‘the literature of the third and second centuries BCE begins to show an interest in resurrection as one response to persecution and oppression’. However, it is difficult to take seriously his suggestion that ‘the motivation for entertaining the idea of resurrection was that God, or the gods, rectify the injustice perpetrated in this life.’ This seems to me to be the sort of explanation one might expect from an academic who knows nothing of the realities of fighting oppression. Such combatants, whether they be Marxists, nationalist revolutionaries or the marginal sort, are well aware that involvement in such a struggle more often than not involves a violent, premature death at the hands of civilisation's rulers.<sup>1671</sup> Their problem is not a feeling that life has proved unfair, entitling them to some sort of compensation – the whingeing complaint of passive civilisation folk. They are quite prepared to sacrifice their lives for a cause which they believe merits it without regard for the niceties of civilisation's justice (see Nelson Mandela's speech at his trial for treason). The fear which causes them sleepless nights is not anything so trivial as a proper balancing of the books. It is rather that their struggle may turn out to have been hopeless from the very beginning, mocking all of their sacrifices, struggles and pain. Consequently they look for something far more solid than a recompense of heavenly bliss. *They look for a vindication written in the material facts of history*, which is not to say that they necessarily always live to see it. We must therefore reject Funk's first explanation concerning the rise of the Christian resurrection tradition.

Funk's second suggestion is that the resurrection stories were created to establish the authority of various individuals or factions within the early Church:

In all probability they constitute claims made on behalf of some leader or sponsor. ... The identification of the one to whom Jesus first appeared (called the *protophany*) seems to have played a significant role in the development of the resurrection tradition. There are three

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<sup>1669</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 275.

<sup>1670</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 276.

<sup>1671</sup> See the discussion about Jesus' awareness of the likely outcome of his own activity in *Light Denied* pp. 303-311.

candidates for the honour of being the first: Peter, Mary, and James. ... The recipient of the protophany was undoubtedly to be understood as preeminent among the leaders of the new movement. Since Mary was a woman, she did not qualify to be a leader under the terms of the patriarchal society to which she belonged. The honour was thus shared between Peter and James. The variations in these stories in all probability reflect the actual rivalries at work in the early Jesus movement.<sup>1672</sup>

Once again Funk is swift to point out, quite rightly, that such an idea of divinely ordained pre-eminence is profoundly at odds with the teaching of Jesus himself:

All of this is, of course, incongruent with the teachings of Jesus. It is by no means clear that he appointed anyone to anything. Access to God – in his vision of the kingdom – was unbrokered. He did not support the preeminence of an inner circle of followers but advised that those who aspired to be leaders should make themselves slaves of all. In sum, the leaders of the primitive community did just what most human communities do as they are formed and mature – they engaged in a struggle to establish a perpetual pecking order with themselves at the head. Viewed in this light, the resurrection is entirely self-serving for the leaders of the Jesus movement.<sup>1673</sup>

Whilst I am quite prepared to acknowledge that the resurrection stories demonstrate the presence of rivalries for leadership within the early Church I would point out that the prominent role of women within them makes it unrealistic to claim that they were created for this purpose. Indeed all the evidence suggests that though the stories were quite possibly used in this way they must have been created for some other reason: most probably, I suggest, because something happened. It would seem, therefore, that both of Funk's explanations prove inadequate. This does not mean that we should reject all of his findings. I am happy to accept that Jesus' resurrection has to be understood in terms of some vindication constituted by an empirically attestable occurrence taking place almost immediately after his crucifixion and that this 'event' has to be something which came about gradually over a length of time, leading to the production of numerous and varied accounts which cannot easily be made to square with each other. That said, I feel obliged to point out that what stands out most clearly from the contributions which he and Borg make is their inability to find anything positive to say about Jesus' resurrection, which is strange given its remarkable prominence in the tradition.

*The Resurrection as seen by E. P. Sanders from a conservative point of view .*

Sanders' strong point is his recognition of the fact that according to the Gospels it is Jesus' resurrection, not his miracles, which brought conviction, making all the difference for the disciples as to how they behaved:

What can we learn about the responses of Jesus' disciples and close followers to his miracles? We have seen that Mark especially depicts the disciples as having less confidence in Jesus than did some strangers, and as being unimpressed with the miracles. Matthew and Luke give the disciples a little more credit, but nevertheless we can hardly doubt such things as that they fled when he was arrested and that Peter followed far off and denied that he was Jesus' follower when asked (Mark 14.54, 66-72 & parr.). Later some of the disciples would be willing to die because of their devotion to Jesus and his message. The explanation of the change is that they saw the resurrected Lord, and these experiences gave them absolute confidence. Jesus' miracles did not do so.<sup>1674</sup>

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<sup>1672</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 267.

<sup>1673</sup> Funk, *Honest*, p. 273.

<sup>1674</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, p. 164.

I am happy with this finding which is well observed. But how does Sanders explain this difference? Taking as read his own belief that a miracle is simply an act which displays some individual's affinity with God, the resurrection appears to be a miracle performed by God himself. Given this understanding, why should people find a miracle performed by God any more compelling than a miracle performed by one of his close associates? Sanders never tell us.

Sanders describes the situation immediately after the crucifixion thus:

Jesus thought that the kingdom of God was at hand, and his disciples had accepted his message. ... he may have died disappointed. His disciples, reasonably thinking that they would be next, hid. Some of his women followers - who were safer than the men and possibly braver - watched him die and saw Josephus of Arimathea bury his body. I assume that, besides being afraid that Caiaphas and Pilate would turn on them next, all his followers were disappointed. The coming kingdom had sounded so marvellous! The last would be first, the meek would inherit the earth. These expectations were not fulfilled, at least not in any obvious way. What did happen was a surprise.<sup>1675</sup>

Commenting on the resurrection experiences he remarks:

I do not regard fraud a worthwhile explanation. Many of the people in these lists were to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming that they had seen the risen Lord, and several of them would die for their cause. Moreover, a calculated deception should have produced greater unanimity. Instead, there seem to have been *competitors*: 'I saw him first!' 'No! I did.' Paul's tradition that 500 people saw Jesus at the same time has led some people to suggest that Jesus' followers suffered mass hysteria. But mass hysteria does not explain the other traditions.

Like Funk, Sanders finds Paul's accounts, in which the apostle likens the resurrection appearances to his own vision, easier to accept than those found in the Gospels. That said he finds it odd that Paul should talk about a 'spiritual body'.<sup>1676</sup> He concludes somewhat lamely:

That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgement, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know. Much about the historical Jesus will remain a mystery. Nothing is more mysterious than the stories of his resurrection, which attempt to portray an experience that the authors could not themselves comprehend.<sup>1677</sup>

This is clearly a copout and not an historians' proper discretion when faced with an inadequately understood, and therefore portrayed, event. I can't help thinking that had Sanders been talking about anything other than the resurrection he would not have been so hesitant in offering a professional opinion. However, leaving that aside what interests me about his account is that he builds his picture of the resurrection on the phenomenon of *disappointment*. Jesus may have died *disappointed* that God did not bring in the kingdom and the disciples were *disappointed* for the same reason since the kingdom as spoken of by Jesus had sounded so marvellous. The central aspect of this choice of word is that, in accordance with Sanders' conservative 'Jewish salvation history' point of view, all the onus is put on the leader. Jesus does everything, making

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<sup>1675</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, p. 276.

<sup>1676</sup> 'To many, Paul's evidence seems most suggestive. He does not distinguish the Lord's appearance to him from that of the other appearances *in kind*. If he had a vision, maybe they also had visions. But then why does Paul insist that he saw a "spiritual body"? He could have said "spirit".' Sanders, *Figure*, pp. 280.

<sup>1677</sup> Sanders, *Figure*, pp. 279-80.

up for his disciples who do precious little, yet God completely lets the side down ... only then to perform an unexpected miracle to turn things round at the last minute in a way not even an historian as competent as Sanders can comprehend! I have to say that I find all of this simply unbelievable.

Nowhere in what Sanders writes is there a hint of what one might *realistically* have expected: that the disciples were left tortured by the fact that at the crucial moment Jesus had so painstakingly been leading them up to they had all let the side down by running away. Given this scenario the right way of describing the disciples feelings immediately following the crucifixion is not as *disappointment* but rather as *a crushing sense of personal and collective guilt!* Attributing disappointment to Jesus and the disciples implies that they were on the whole passive spectators looking to God to save the day and rescue them from their hopeless situation by a reality-defying *tour de force*. That is certainly what conservative timids, working with Sanders' Jewish salvation history model, would have craved and perhaps even madly expected from their centrarchical God but is it true to the texts? Do these tell us that Jesus, in true conservative fashion, instructed his disciples to do their best, trust him as their leader, and leave the rest to God? That certainly sounds like a 'Christian' exhortation taken from some Hollywood film but it has nothing whatsoever to do with the biblical texts, as far as I can see, for clearly the disciples were not expecting to be saved by a miraculous event: *if they had they would not have run away as they did*. Had the disciples stayed with Jesus and died with him there might have been some sense in describing them as being disappointed. However, the fact that they all deserted him indicates that had Jesus taught them to expect a miraculous intervention by God – something I consider altogether unlikely – they had all come to the conclusion he was badly mistaken. This would mean that their reaction to the crucifixion, apart from sadness and distress for Jesus himself, would have been one of relief that they at least had made the right decision, disappointment being out of the question.

But what about Jesus himself? Had he believed he could trust God to intervene to save him he certainly would have died disappointed and this is how Christopher Rowland seems to understand the cry of dereliction:

... while it may be dangerous to attempt to say too much about Jesus' expectation at this time, the cry of dereliction (Mark 15.33) suggests a disappointment which would be entirely comprehensible if Jesus believed that, even at the last, God may have brought in the kingdom.<sup>1678</sup>

However, a god-of-the-marginals reading makes rather different sense of this text. As a 'revolutionary' Jesus would certainly have, in Paul's terms, hoped against hope that God would *vindicate* him. For otherwise the whole demonstration exercise would be exposed as a sham, blackening Yahweh's name. That said, he would undoubtedly have understood that there was no saying exactly how and when this vindication, in the form of the softening of human hearts, would occur, especially given Second Isaiah's understanding that suffering was part and parcel of the exercise. This being the case the cry of dereliction should not be seen as indicating anything as banal as disappointment. Rather it should be understood as the faithful 'revolutionary's' existential recognition

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<sup>1678</sup> Rowland, *Origins*, p. 145.

that death as well as life has to be faced without any concrete assurance that Yahweh's project – to which he has given his all – is even viable. Though ordinary, class-based revolutionaries often die before their aims are achieved they can at least rest assured their efforts weigh in the balance determining the final outcome. For the marginal 'revolutionary' this is not the case since there is no cause-and-effect connection linking the demonstration and exposure exercise and the softening of human hearts. Vindication *may* come but equally it may turn out that such an exercise is simply pissing against the wind, as we civilisation folk have always maintained.

*The Resurrection as seen by J. D. Crossan from a radical point of view.*

Crossan explains that there is no evidence to suggest that people of Jesus' day thought of resurrection experiences as being either exceptional or out of this world. He also points out that medical practitioners today consider it quite normal to have such visions, their being all part and parcel of the grieving process.<sup>1679</sup> Because of this he finds it impossible to accept the received opinion that it was the resurrection which gave birth to Christianity.<sup>1680</sup> He therefore hypothesises that 'the birth of Christianity is the interaction between the historical Jesus and his first companions and the continuation of that relationship despite his execution'.<sup>1681</sup> It should be understood that in saying this Crossan does not seek to exclude the resurrection from this birthing process. Rather he wishes to see the whole phenomenon more widely. This ties in with his conviction that Jesus' basic aim was 'to rebuild a society upward from its grass roots ...'.<sup>1682</sup> For Crossan it was this whole building process, begun by Jesus in conjunction with his disciples and continued by them even after Jesus' execution, which gave birth to Christianity and which constituted the historical movement which Paul first persecuted and then subsequently joined.

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<sup>1679</sup> 'Not only were visions and apparitions an accepted and even commonplace possibility in the early first century, they are also an accepted and even commonplace possibility in the late twentieth century. In a paper presented to the 1995 spring meeting of the Jesus Seminar, Stacy Davids summarized recent psychiatric literature on grief and bereavement. "Review of well-conducted studies of the past three decades shows that about one-half to eighty percent of bereaved people studied feel this intuitive, sometimes overwhelming 'presence' or 'spirit' of the lost person.... These perceptions happened most often in the first few months following the death but sometimes persist more than a year, with significantly more women than men reporting these events.....' Crossan, *Birth*, pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>1680</sup> 'Asked about the birth of Christianity, most people might say .... Christianity was born on Easter Sunday .... It is the resurrection of a dead man that explains the power of Christianity's birth and growth, spread and triumph, across the Roman Empire. Here, however, is the problem. Why, against that early-first-century context, does vision, apparition, or resurrection explain anything, since such events were not considered absolutely extraordinary let alone completely unique? And why, in this late-twentieth-century context, do they explain anything if things are still the same?' Crossan, *Birth*, p. xviii.

<sup>1681</sup> 'It is not enough to say that the vision of a dead man birthed Christianity, because that, at least in the first century and probably in every century since, is not special enough of itself to explain anything. Neither is it enough to say that the vision of a dead man was interpreted as the start of the general resurrection and that interpretation birthed Christianity. That only rephrases the problem: Why was this man's resurrection, as distinct from any and all other ones, understood as such a beginning? From that problem as presupposition I draw this hypothesis: the birth of Christianity is the interaction between the historical Jesus and his first companions and the continuation of that relationship despite his execution.' Crossan, *Birth*, p. xxi

<sup>1682</sup> See p. 504 above.

Given this general scenario, what role does Crossan see the resurrection stories as playing in this immediately-before and immediately-after continuum? It would appear that for him the resurrection constitutes the interface between the before and the after:

If those who accepted Jesus during his earthly life had not continued to follow, believe, and experience his continuing presence after the crucifixion, all would have been over. That is the resurrection, the continuing presence in a continuing community of the past Jesus in a radically new and transcendental mode of present and future existence.

As such, resurrection concerns both *continuity* and *authority*:

But how to *express* that phenomenon (of continuity)? And, just as significantly for any human process involving a now-dead founder, what was, by Jesus' will, to be the direction of that community, what was to be its authority structure, and who was to be in charge? But how to express *that* phenomenon?<sup>1683</sup>

It would seem therefore that for Crossan the resurrection stories are to be seen as the way in which the early Church *expressed* its understanding of its continuing existence and of how authority was to be structured within it.

As regards bodily resurrection Crossan argues strenuously against any Platonic separation of body and spirit:

The earthly Jesus was not just a thinker with ideas but a rebel with a cause. He was a Jewish peasant with an attitude, and he claimed that his attitude was that of the Jewish God. But it was, he said, in his life and in ones like it that the kingdom of God was revealed, that the Jewish God of justice and righteousness was incarnated in a world of injustice and unrighteousness. The kingdom of God was never just about words and ideas, aphorisms and parables, sayings and dialogues. It was about a way of life. And that means it was about a body of flesh and blood. Justice is always about bodies and lives, not just about words and ideas. Resurrection does not mean, simply, that the spirit or soul of Jesus lives on in the world. And neither does it mean, simply, that the companions or followers of Jesus live on in the world. *It must be the embodied life that remains powerfully efficacious in this world.* I recognize those claims as an historian, and I believe them as a Christian.

He uses this argument to counter any tendency to separate the risen Jesus from the Jesus of history, as for example in Timothy Johnson's book *The Real Jesus*.<sup>1684</sup>

There is, then, only one Jesus, the embodied Galilean who lived a life of divine justice in an unjust world, who was officially and legally executed by that world's accredited representatives, and whose continued empowering presence indicates, for believers, that God is not on the side of injustice-even (or especially) imperial injustice. There are not two Jesuses - one pre-Easter and another post-Easter, one earthly and another heavenly, one with a physical and another with a spiritual body. There is only one Jesus, the *historical* Jesus who incarnated the Jewish God of justice for a believing community committed to continuing such incarnation ever afterward.<sup>1685</sup>

All of this suggests that Crossan sees bodily resurrection not as symbolising a stupendous, out-of-this-world event but simply as an expression of the early Church's anti-Gnostic attitudes and beliefs.<sup>1686</sup>

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<sup>1683</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 404.

<sup>1684</sup> Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (Harper Collins. New York 1996). See Crossan, *Birth*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>1685</sup> Crossan, *Birth*, p. xxx.

<sup>1686</sup> See Funk's analysis on p. 532 above.



As for the resurrection accounts themselves Crossan supplements these by adding to them both the story of the transfiguration as well as those of the so-called nature miracles, all of which he sees as being resurrection narratives (dealing with the question of authority) which have been retrojected back into Jesus' earthly life.<sup>1687</sup> Crossan believes he can trace the development in a single line from a historical passion, composed on the basis of minimal knowledge, through to a narrative passion which flows 'from the Cross Gospel, now embedded in the Gospel of Peter, into Mark and thence, all together, into John.'<sup>1688</sup> However, he notes that 'although, in general, all later versions accepted the *Cross Gospel's* passion sequence, none of them was willing to accept its resurrection account.' The reason for this, he believes, was that whereas the *Cross Gospel* could say with serene simplicity that Jesus rose and Rome converted, the others 'were concerned with how that process was actualised. Who led it, who was in charge, and who was in charge of those in charge?'<sup>1689</sup>

A number of people have criticised Crossan's hypothesis as regards the way in which the resurrection narratives developed, doubting whether the *Cross Gospel* ever existed. However, I can find no fault with his logic. Furthermore the methodology by which he ascertains this development is certainly as sound and transparent as any alternative methodology known to me. What concerns me is not this matter but rather Crossan's central argument that the resurrection stories are simply the way in which Jesus' followers chose to speak of the continuity and leadership of their community. My problem with this is not simply that I do not believe there is any justification for thinking that Jesus' aim was to build up the community from its grass roots.<sup>1690</sup> It is also that I believe Sanders is clearly right in saying that in the Gospels the resurrection is put forward, rightly or wrongly, as a great turning point ... I would even go so far as to say *the* great turning point in human history.<sup>1691</sup> This means that interpreting it as nothing more than 'an interface' seems like underplaying its significance, to put it mildly.

Of course I quite accept that the Church has been abysmally wrongheaded and foolish when it has argued that the simple matter of an empty tomb taken in conjunction with a few resurrection appearances, proves Christianity right. That is not just inherently crass but also light-years away from what the evangelists were trying to say, as Funk's and Crossan's analyses clearly show. Whatever we may think about the matter it is absurd to pretend that Jesus' followers put forward the empty tomb and their resurrection experiences as proof of anything. That said it seems to me equally absurd to try and solve the problem of the resurrection by evacuating from it everything that characterises it as an historical event, as Funk and Crossan do in their turn – however

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<sup>1687</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, pp. 398-9.

<sup>1688</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 376.

<sup>1689</sup> Crossan, *Historical*, p. 396.

<sup>1690</sup> See above p. 504.

<sup>1691</sup> 'Mark especially depicts the disciples as having less confidence in Jesus than did some strangers, and as being unimpressed with the miracles. Matthew and Luke give the disciples a little more credit, but nevertheless we can hardly doubt such things as that they fled when he was arrested and that Peter followed far off and denied that he was Jesus' follower when asked. Later some of the disciples would be willing to die because of their devotion to Jesus and his message. The explanation of the change is that they saw the resurrected Lord, and these experiences gave them absolute confidence.' Sanders, *Jesus*, p. 164.

long, drawn out and difficult-to-describe such an ‘event’ might turn out to be. And let me hasten to add that I am not talking here about the resurrection as an ‘event’ that is characteristically supernatural and tricky but as an ‘event’ consisting of real historical features which are in principle verifiable by any competent historian.

Over and above this central concern I have to reiterate that given the fact that the first resurrection experiences were attributed to women, who had no prospect of authority and who carried no weight as witnesses, it seems to me hard to sustain that such stories were actually created in order to express the new community’s understanding of the authority it saw itself as being given through its leaders. I have, as I have said, no problem at all with the idea that resurrection stories came to be used by the community in its discussion of the question of authority. But we are not here concerned with how these stories came to be used but with how and why they arose in the first place. I take on board Crossan’s thesis that, given the nature of human beings and the need to grieve, Jesus’ followers would *inevitably* have experienced such visions. But what caused them to turn these visions into such a defining issue, making it possible to speak about Jesus’ resurrection as the great turning point of human history? Here Crossan – along with Borg, Funk and Sanders – leaves us none the wiser.

*The Resurrection as seen from a god-of-the-marginals point of view*

Given that the above civilisation viewpoints prove incapable of providing a satisfactory understanding of these resurrection experiences, how does a god-of-the-marginals perspective for its part fare? Since everyone seems to be agreed that the resurrection should be understood in terms of salvation – as God’s *vindication* of what Jesus set out to achieve – it is immediately clear that from a god-of-the-marginals point of view these appearance have to be seen as in some way demonstrating Yahweh’s unpredictable, hiatic softening of Gentile hearts. For that is the ‘revolutionary’ understanding of salvation put forward by second Isaiah and later envisioned by his followers in third Isaiah as the nations arriving in Zion to rebuild voluntarily the temple they had so wantonly destroyed. So the question is how can we see these resurrection stories as reflecting such a heart-softening phenomenon?

As soon as you ask yourself this question the answer becomes all too glaringly obvious. *What these resurrection stories portray is the unpredictable softening of the disciples’ own hearts.* The fact that these had previously been predictably hard had been made all too manifest when at the critical moment the disciples had abjectly deserted their master. It is easy to imagine the self-loathing, bitterness and despair, tinged no doubt with a sneaking relief in finding themselves still alive, which must have accompanied Jesus followers as they fled to Galilee to escape retribution. On the one hand they would have been gripped with a horrid sense of underlying anger against Jesus himself given the sheer madness of the enterprise he had involved them in; an enterprise whose crazy nature had now been laid bare by events. On the other hand they would have recognised that Jesus had hidden nothing from them; that they had all engaged themselves willingly, albeit in fear and trembling, knowing perfectly well, at least rationally, what was the score. It is not possible, of course, to trace a logical path from this fundamentally ambivalent state of mind to the one we know they eventually arrived

at: a determination never, ever, to let their master down in the same way again. But the fact that such a change took place, clearly involving the softening of their hearts, is undeniable, as is the fact that they habitually spoke about it in resurrection terms. This 'change of heart' then is the 'event' which we spoke about above and, as you can see, it is indubitably something which actually happened even if its timing as an ongoing process would have been difficult to pin down precisely. Furthermore, as an 'event' it was incontestably historical, rendering it, in principle, something which any historian should be capable of verifying should he or she choose to do so.

Presumably it would not have gone unnoticed amongst Jesus' followers that they who had formerly thought of themselves as faithful Israelites had, effectively, publicly shown themselves to be Gentiles with hearts of stone. This would explain why Paul and others were so insistent that the time had now come when Gentiles should be admitted into the community. For clearly in the new situation created by the resurrection *there was no longer any valid way of distinguishing Gentile from Jew*. Manifestly all men and women had their feet 'outside the camp', with hearts in need of softening. For who had stood with Jesus as a fellow Hebrew 'revolutionary' when the exposing demonstration was finally made, to say nothing of those like Paul who had continued to persecute his movement even after Jesus had been crucified?

To conclude, it seems to me that a god-of-the-marginals perspective not only makes perfectly adequate sense of the Gospel texts but it also avoids all the serious pit-falls which alternative viewpoints create. For it presents the resurrection not as a rather dubious rationalisation of the early Christian movement's most pressing problems but as an historical 'event' open to verification which can quite *logically* be seen, by those who choose to run with it, as changing the course of human history – just as the early Christians themselves had declared.

*But is it in fact historically true to say that this 'event', this happening, effectively brought about such a world-transforming change?* This brings us back to the difficult historicity question we posed at the end of the last chapter when we asked *did Jesus succeed in setting in motion a process of shaming destined to transform civilisation?*<sup>1692</sup> Though I admit the validity of such questions I can think of no scientific way of answering them since they involve a judgement (*our personal judgement*) about the viability of the Hebrew 'revolution'. Was Jesus crazy in believing that the world could be shamed into giving up its privileging ways? .... Well ... was he? I know what my brother thinks BUT WHAT DO YOU AND I THINK? If Jesus had had to go to his death not actually KNOWING the answers to such questions what reason have we to think that our situation is any way different? What we are faced with here are questions which though they can be framed in scientific terms can only be answered in terms of ideological faith, where two or three are gathered together in his name.

*So What?*

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<sup>1692</sup> See above p. 526.

The identification of Yahweh as the god of the marginals and of Jesus as his true servant brings to an end my search for what it is that provides the Bible with its extraordinary cutting edge<sup>1693</sup> since such identifications make it clear that it is the Bible's marginal perspective which is responsible. What therefore can be said about the relevance of this perspective for ourselves? That is a pressing question which unfortunately takes us beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that the answer which we give will surely depend on the state of *our* hearts and on our willingness to seek our own deepest interests in solidarity with the marginals of our era.

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<sup>1693</sup> An edge which all of us experience when we refrain from making ourselves wilfully blind.

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